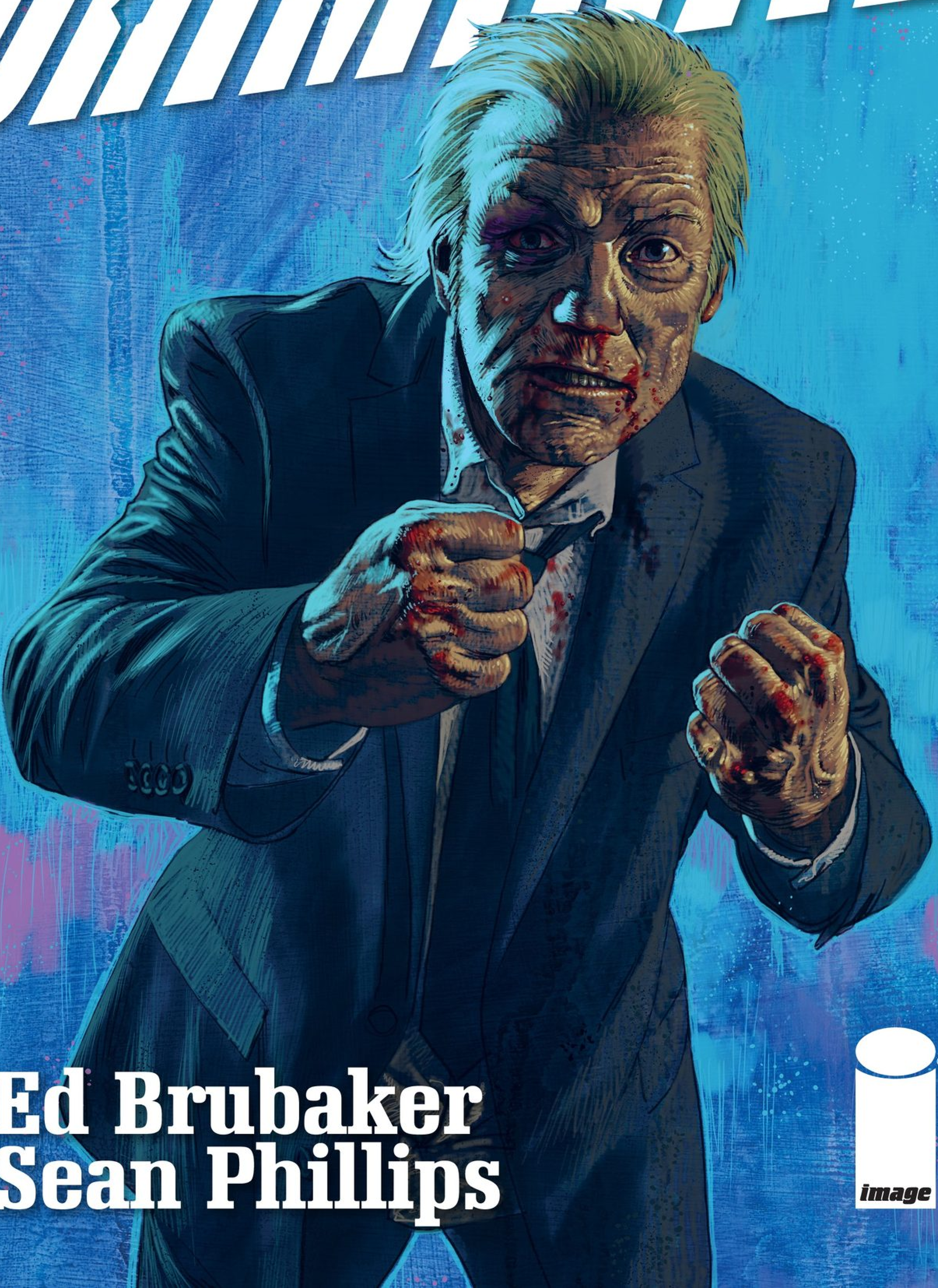
Number One

CRIMINAL™



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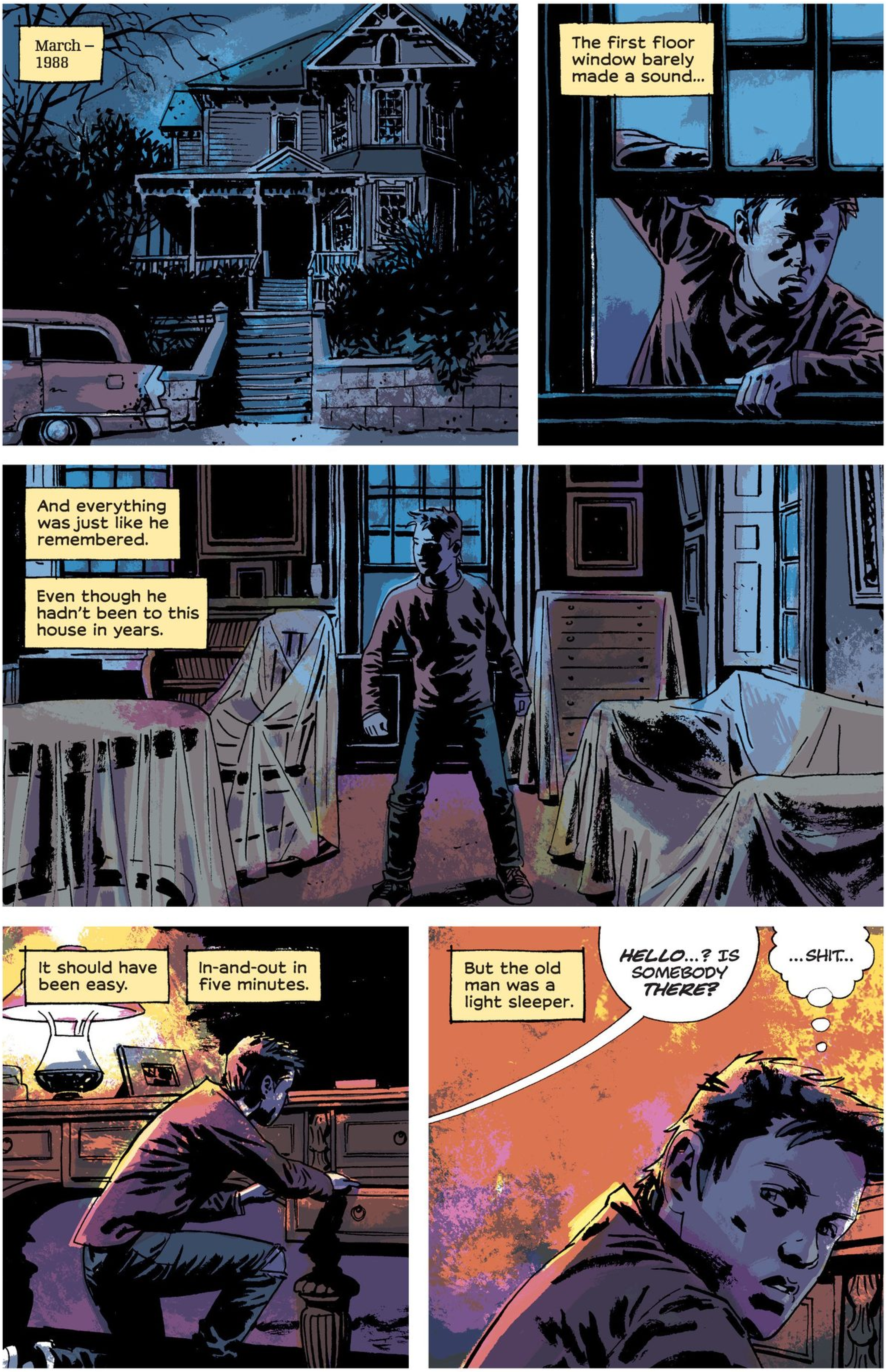
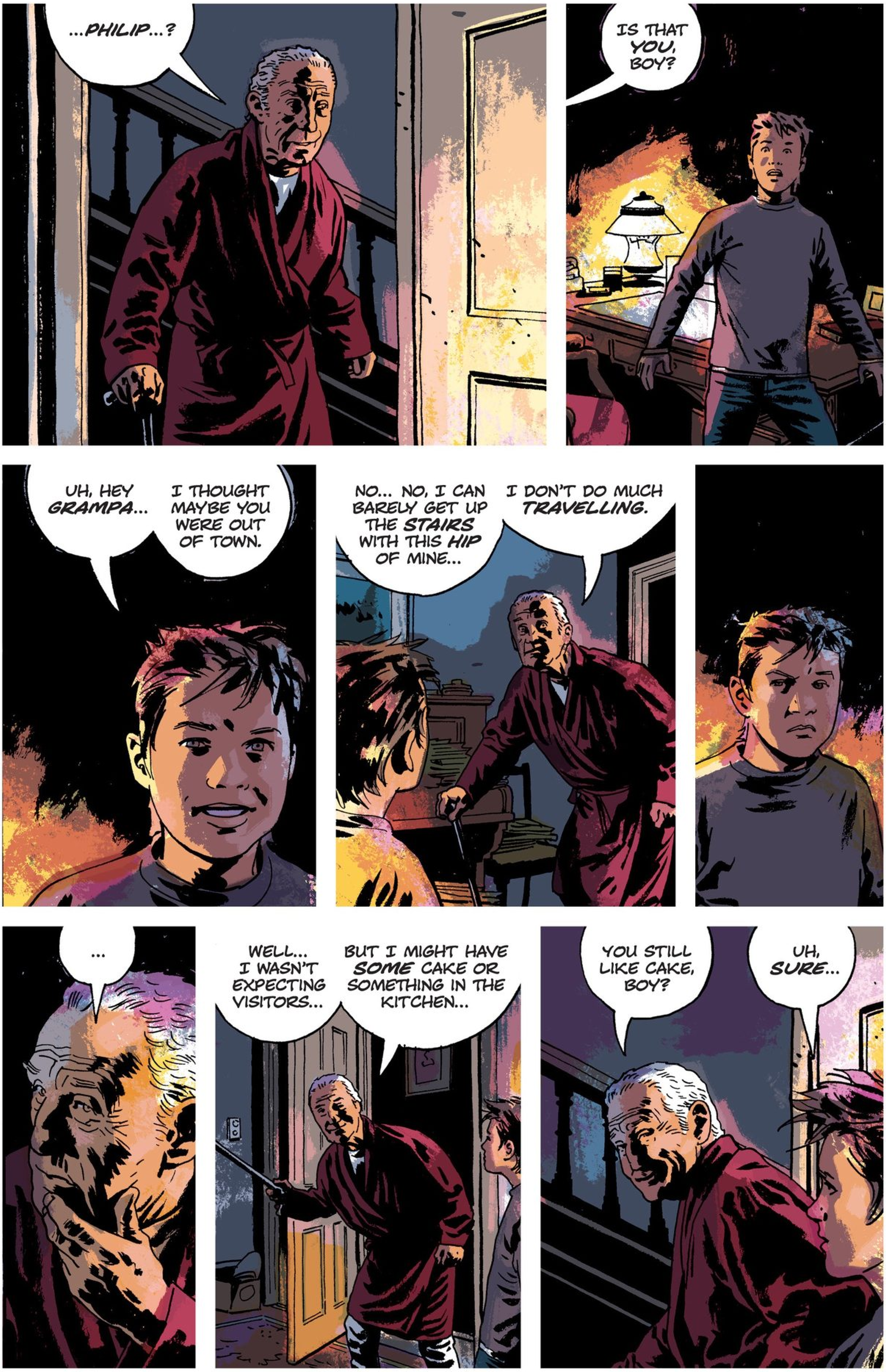
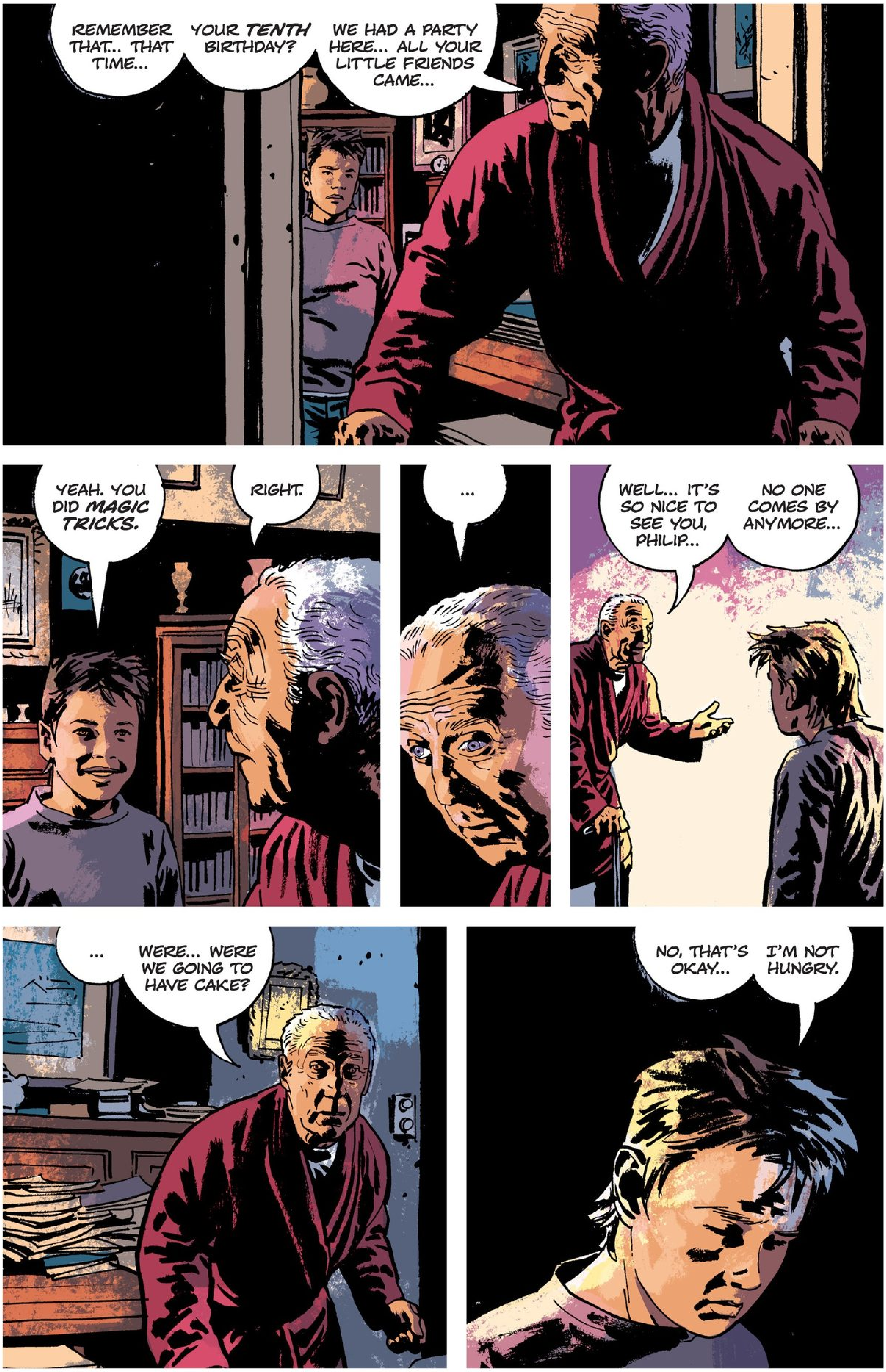
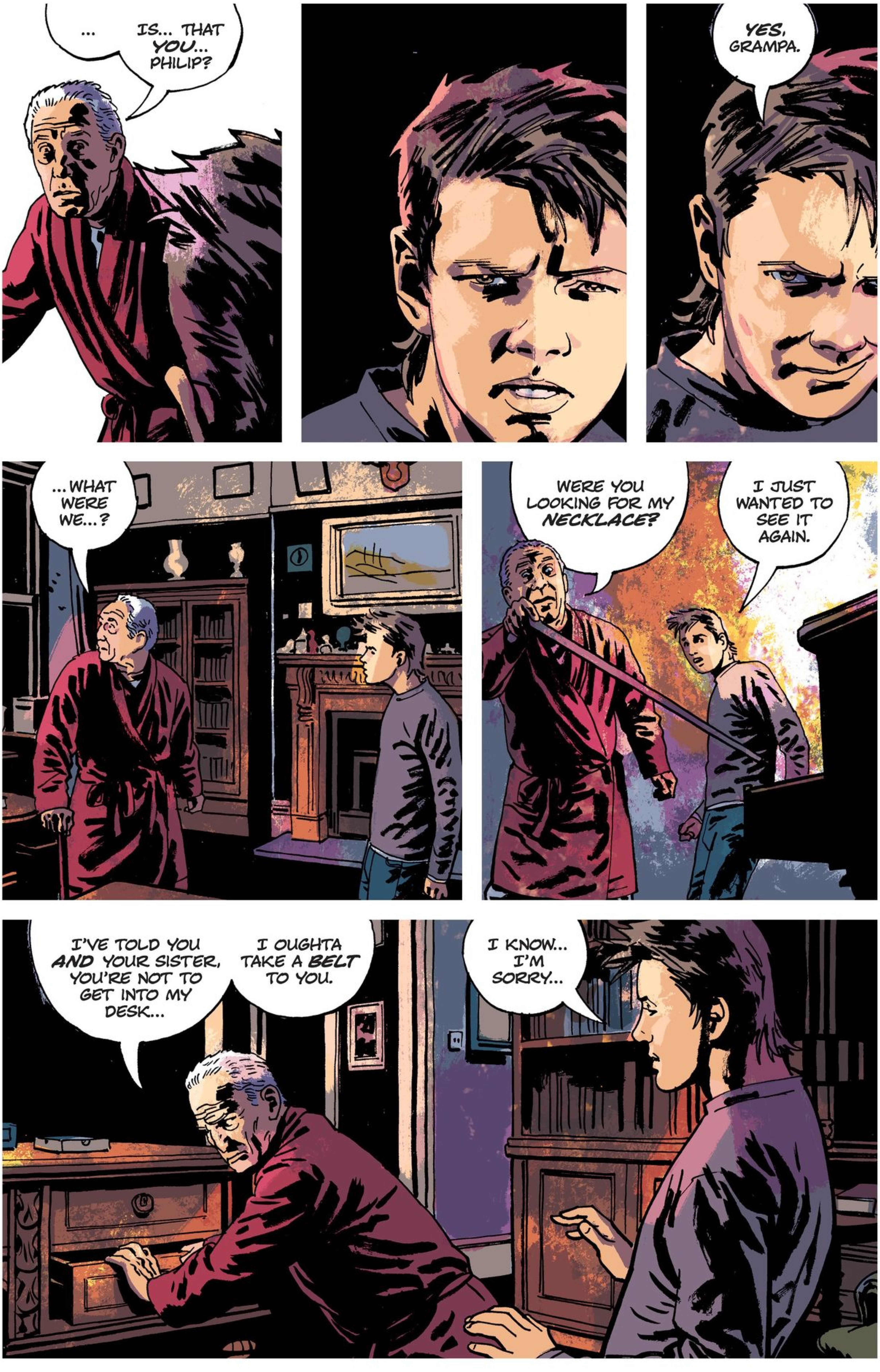
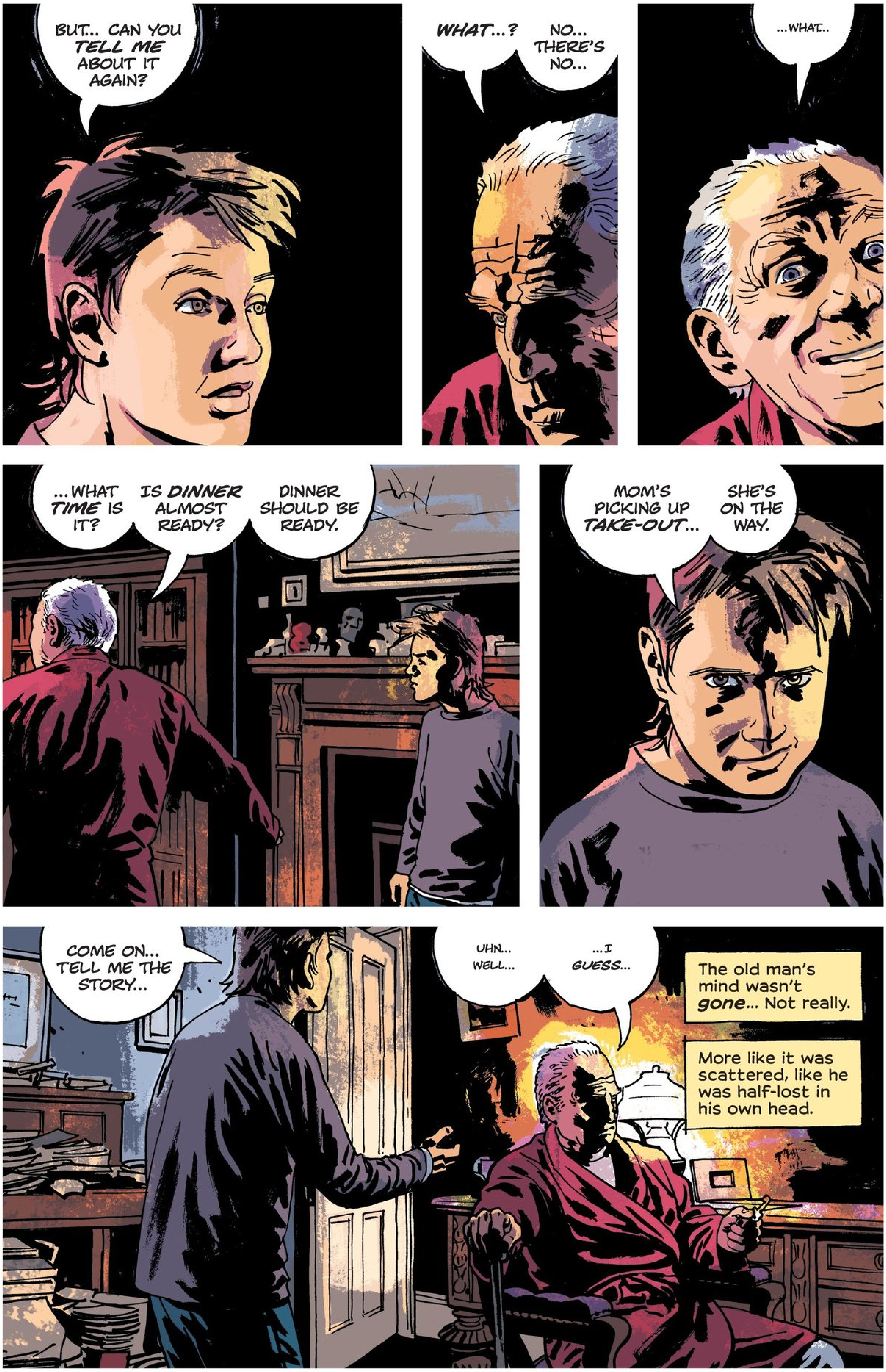
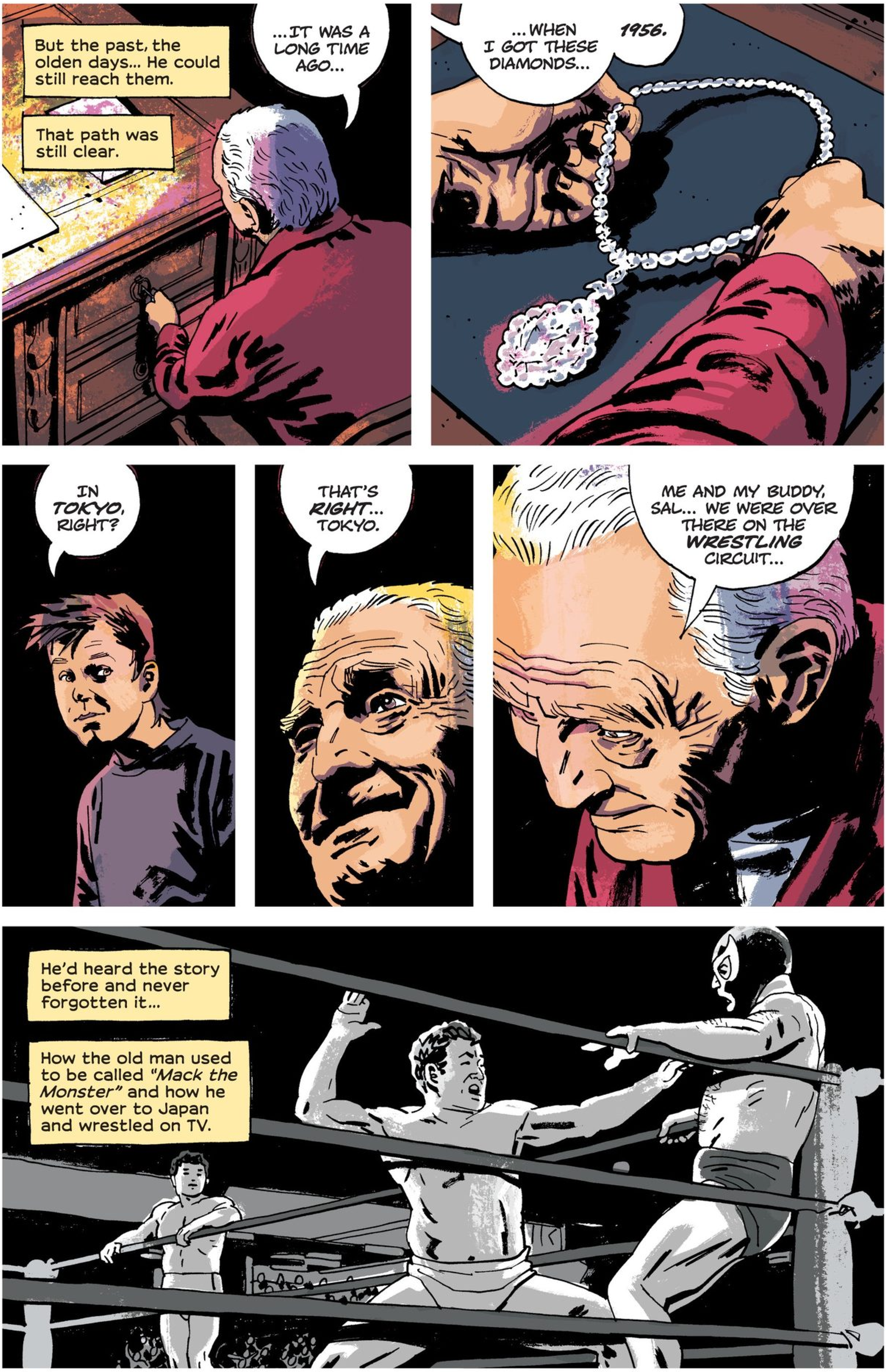

March – 1988
The first floor window barely made a sound...
And everything was just like he remembered.
Even though he hadn't been to this house in years.
It should have been easy.
In-and-out in five minutes.
But the old man was a light sleeper.
HELLO...? IS SOMEBODY *THERE?*
...SHIT...

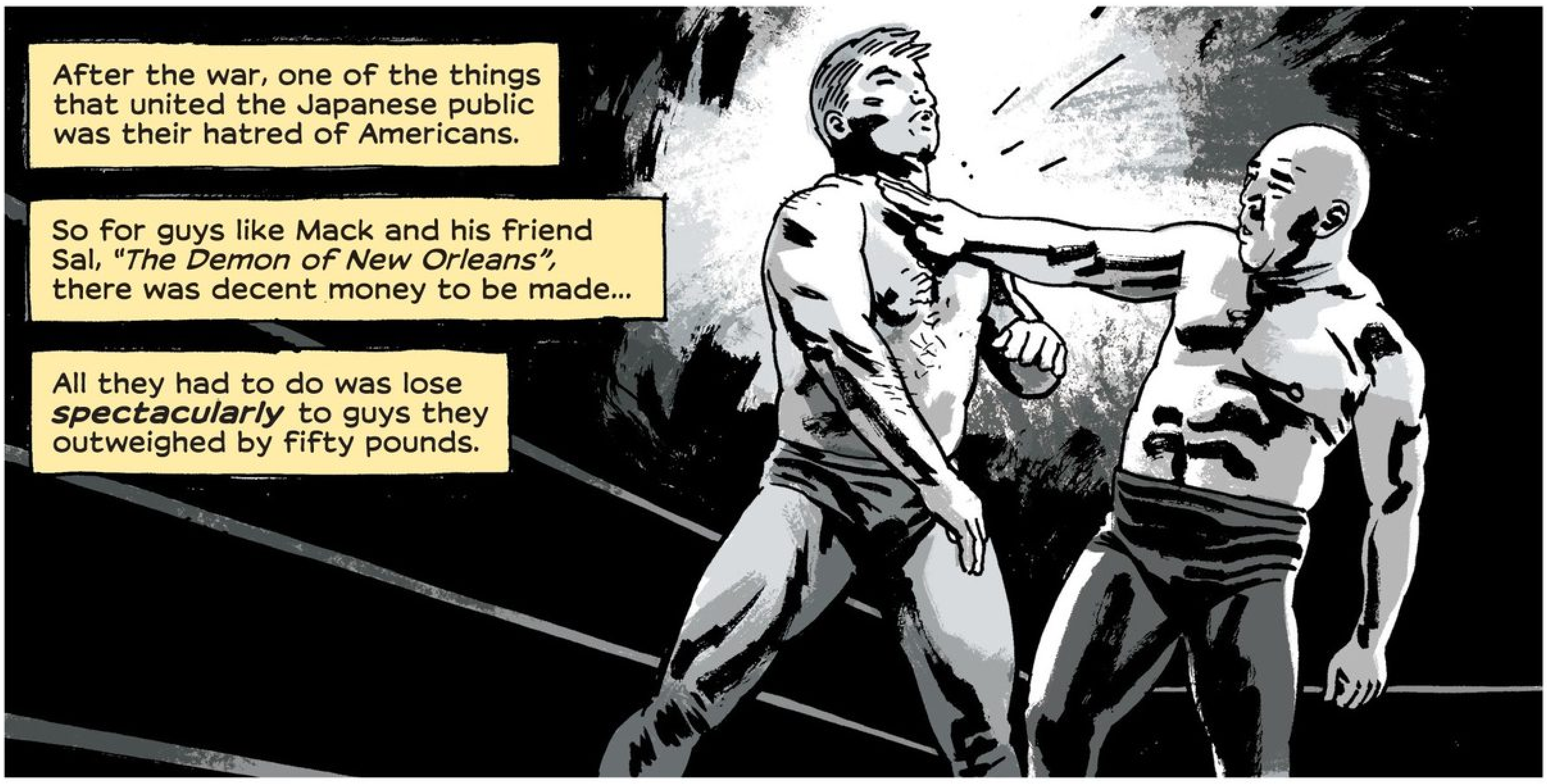

...PHILIP...?
IS THAT YOU, BOY?
UH, HEY GRAMPA...
I THOUGHT MAYBE YOU WERE OUT OF TOWN.
NO... NO, I CAN BARELY GET UP THE STAIRS WITH THIS HIP OF MINE...
I DON'T DO MUCH TRAVELLING.
...
WELL... I WASN'T EXPECTING VISITORS...
BUT I MIGHT HAVE SOME CAKE OR SOMETHING IN THE KITCHEN...
YOU STILL LIKE CAKE, BOY?
UH, SURE...

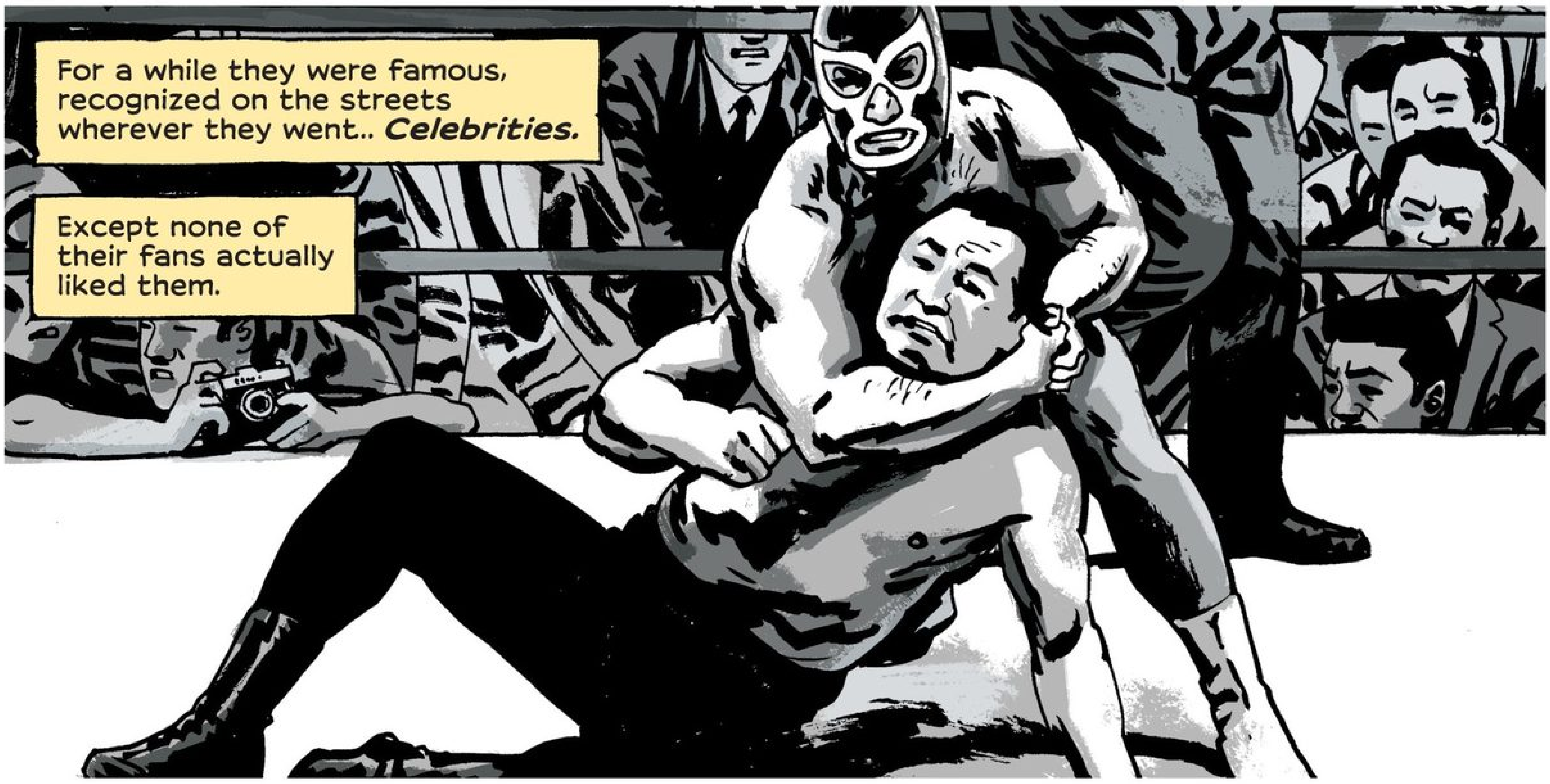

REMEMBER THAT... THAT TIME...
YOUR *TENTH* BIRTHDAY?
WE HAD A PARTY HERE... ALL YOUR LITTLE FRIENDS CAME...
YEAH. YOU DID *MAGIC TRICKS.*
RIGHT.
...
WELL... IT'S SO NICE TO SEE YOU, PHILIP...
NO ONE COMES BY ANYMORE...
...
WERE... WERE WE GOING TO HAVE CAKE?
NO, THAT'S OKAY...
I'M NOT HUNGRY.

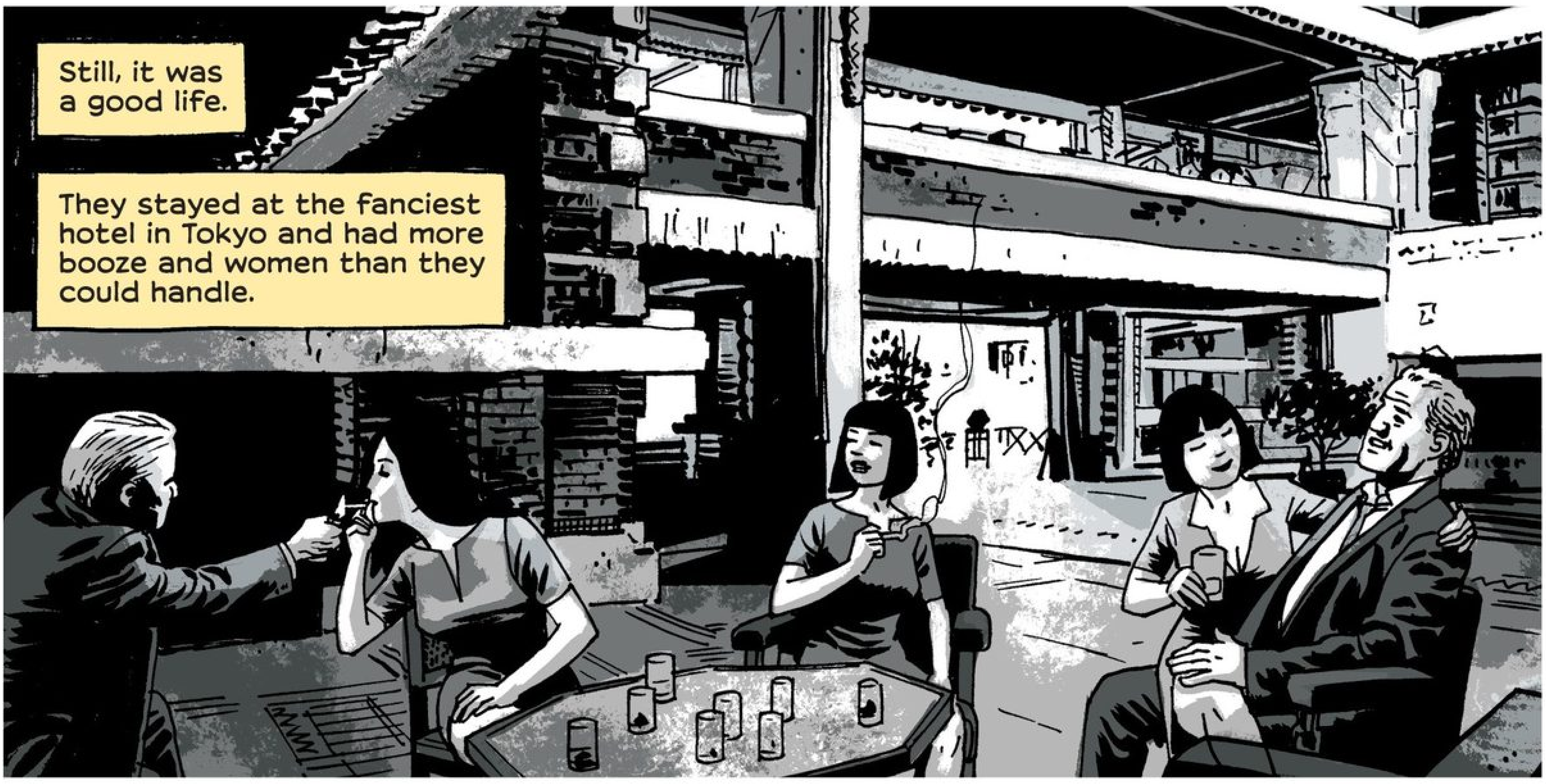

...
IS... THAT *YOU*... PHILIP?
YES, GRAMPA.
...WHAT WERE WE...?
WERE YOU LOOKING FOR MY *NECKLACE?*
I JUST WANTED TO SEE IT AGAIN.
I'VE TOLD YOU *AND* YOUR SISTER, YOU'RE NOT TO GET INTO MY DESK...
I OUGHTA TAKE A *BELT* TO YOU.
I KNOW... I'M SORRY...

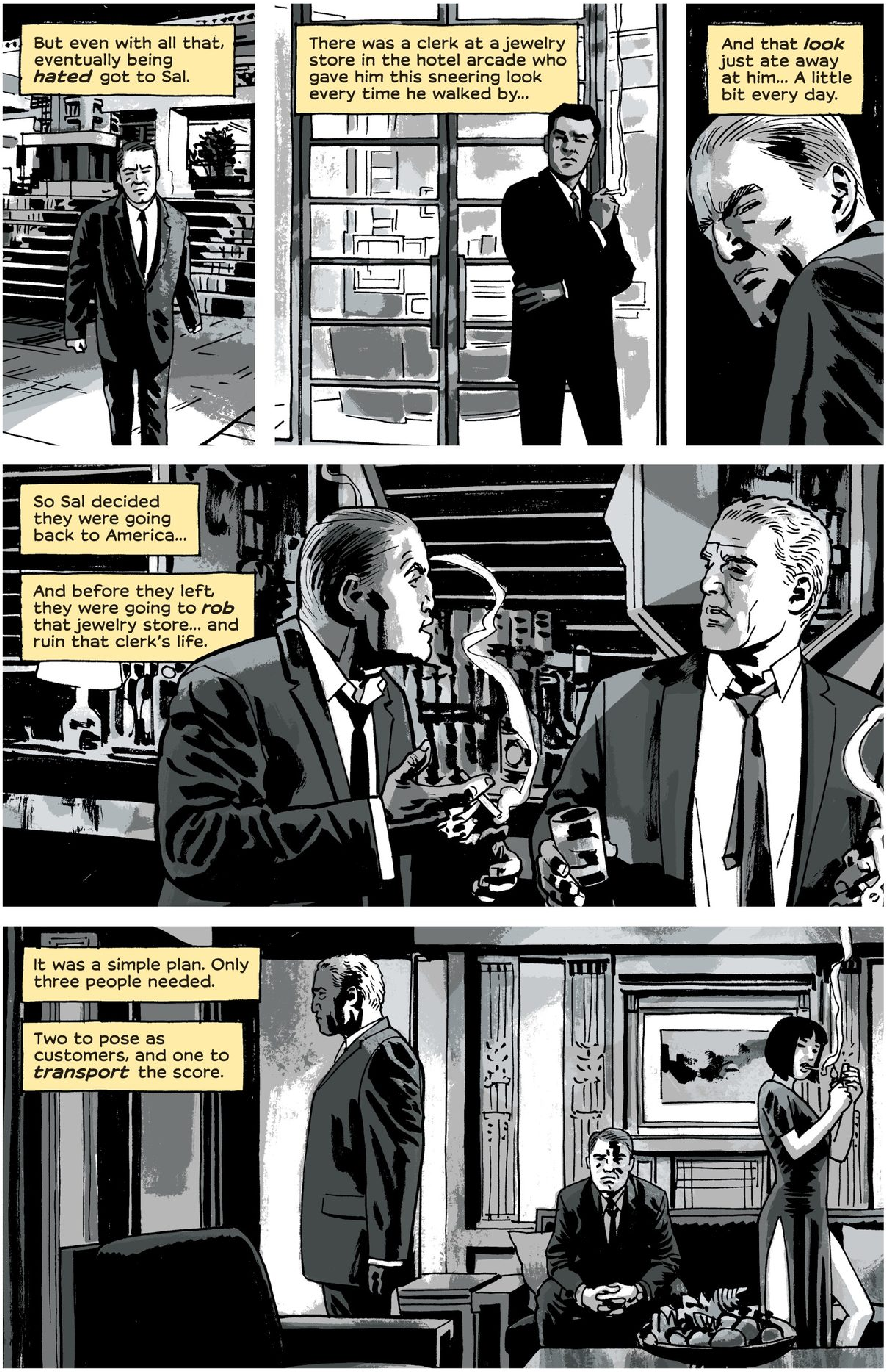

BUT... CAN YOU *TELL ME* ABOUT IT AGAIN?
WHAT...?
NO... THERE'S NO...
...WHAT...
...WHAT *TIME* IS IT?
IS *DINNER* ALMOST READY?
DINNER SHOULD BE READY.
MOM'S PICKING UP *TAKE-OUT*...
SHE'S ON THE WAY.
COME ON... TELL ME THE STORY...
UHN... WELL...
...I *GUESS*...
The old man's mind wasn't *gone*... Not really.
More like it was scattered, like he was half-lost in his own head.

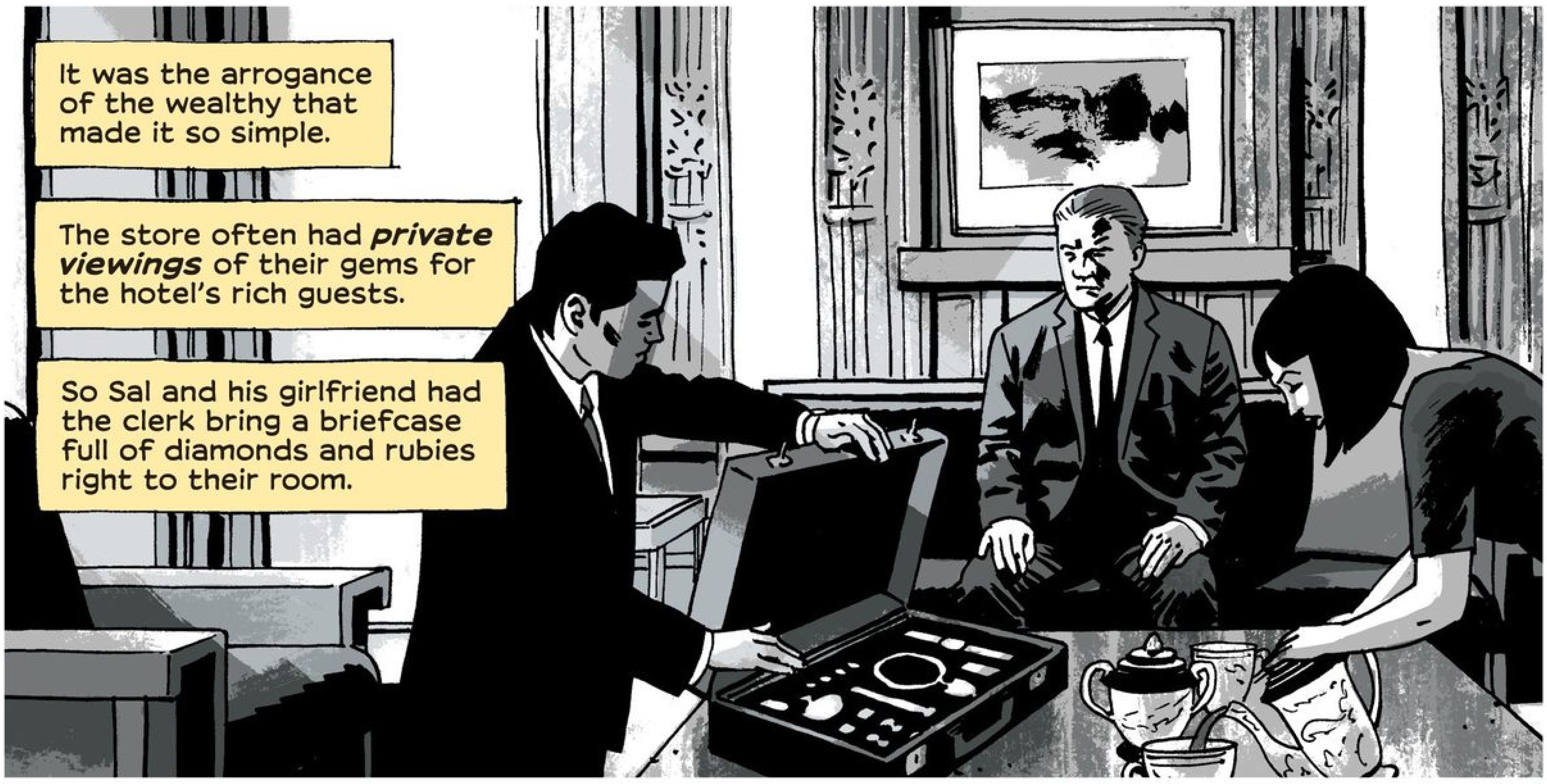

But the past, the olden days... He could still reach them.
That path was still clear.
...IT WAS A LONG TIME AGO...
...WHEN I GOT THESE DIAMONDS...
1956.
IN *TOKYO*, RIGHT?
THAT'S *RIGHT*... TOKYO.
ME AND MY BUDDY, SAL... WE WERE OVER THERE ON THE **WRESTLING** CIRCUIT...
He'd heard the story before and never forgotten it...
How the old man used to be called *"Mack the Monster"* and how he went over to Japan and wrestled on TV.

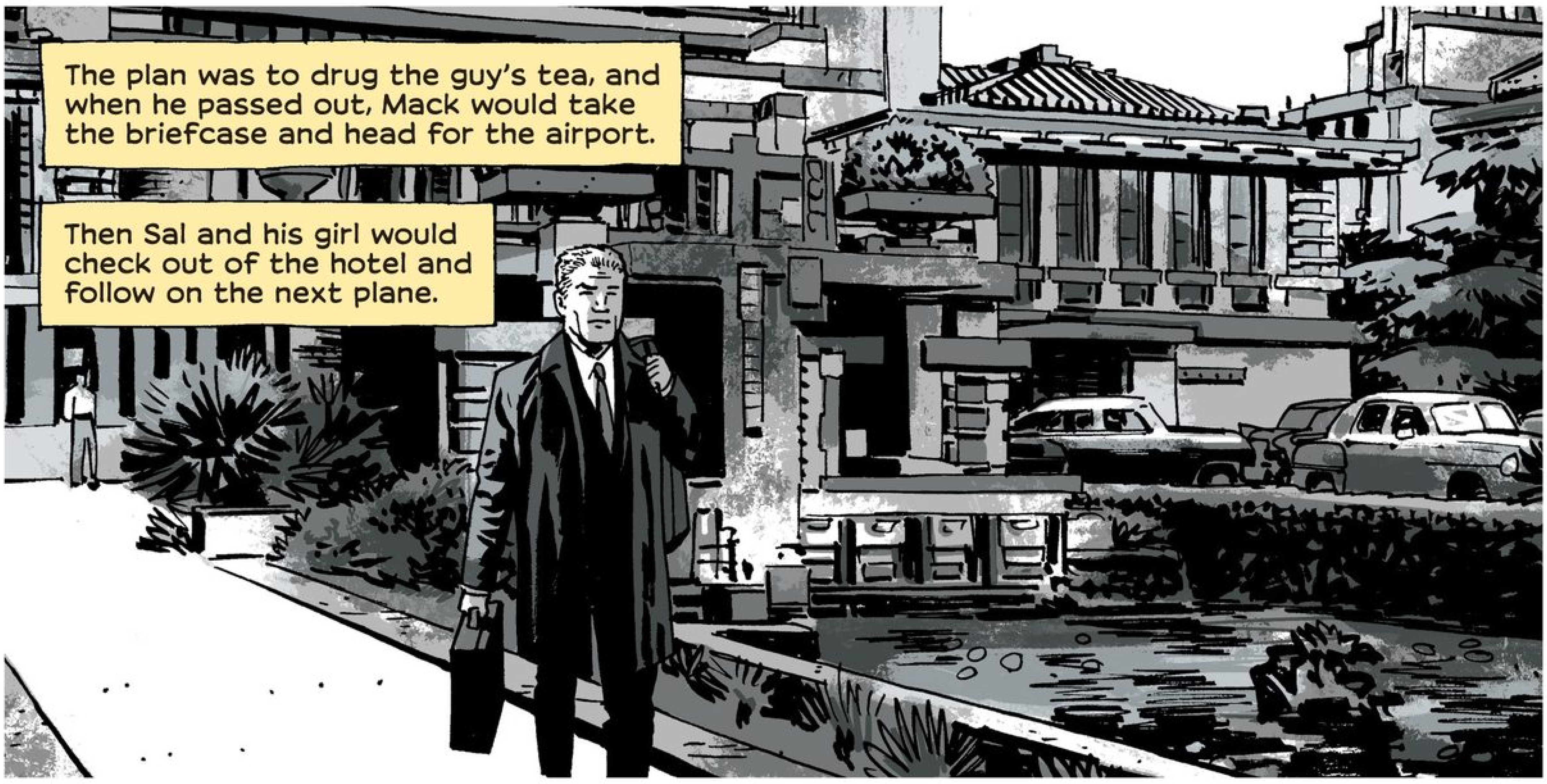

After the war, one of the things that united the Japanese public was their hatred of Americans.
So for guys like Mack and his friend Sal, *"The Demon of New Orleans"*, there was decent money to be made...
All they had to do was lose ***spectacularly*** to guys they outweighed by fifty pounds.

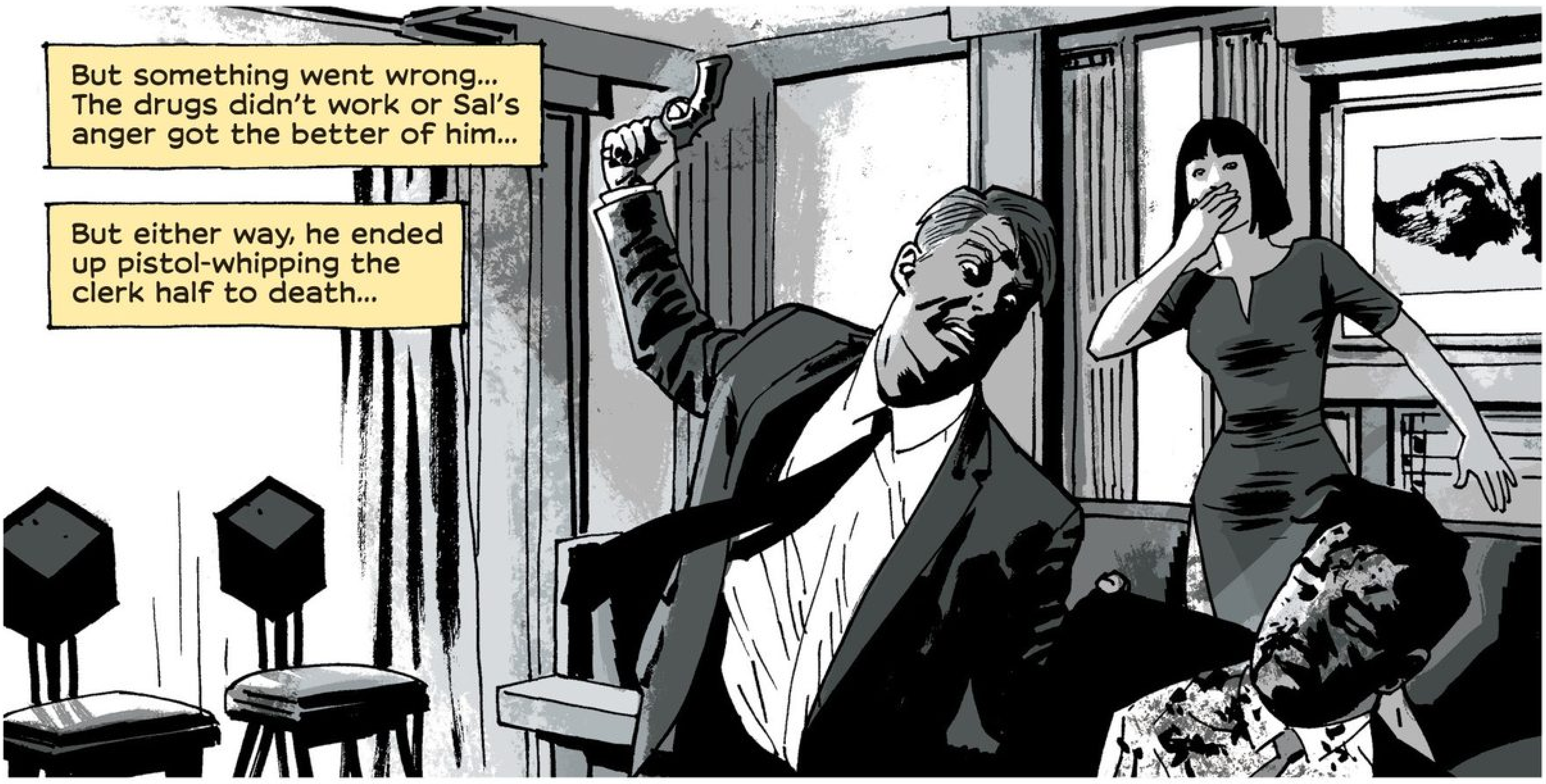

For a while they were famous, recognized on the streets wherever they went.. ***Celebrities.***
Except none of their fans actually liked them.

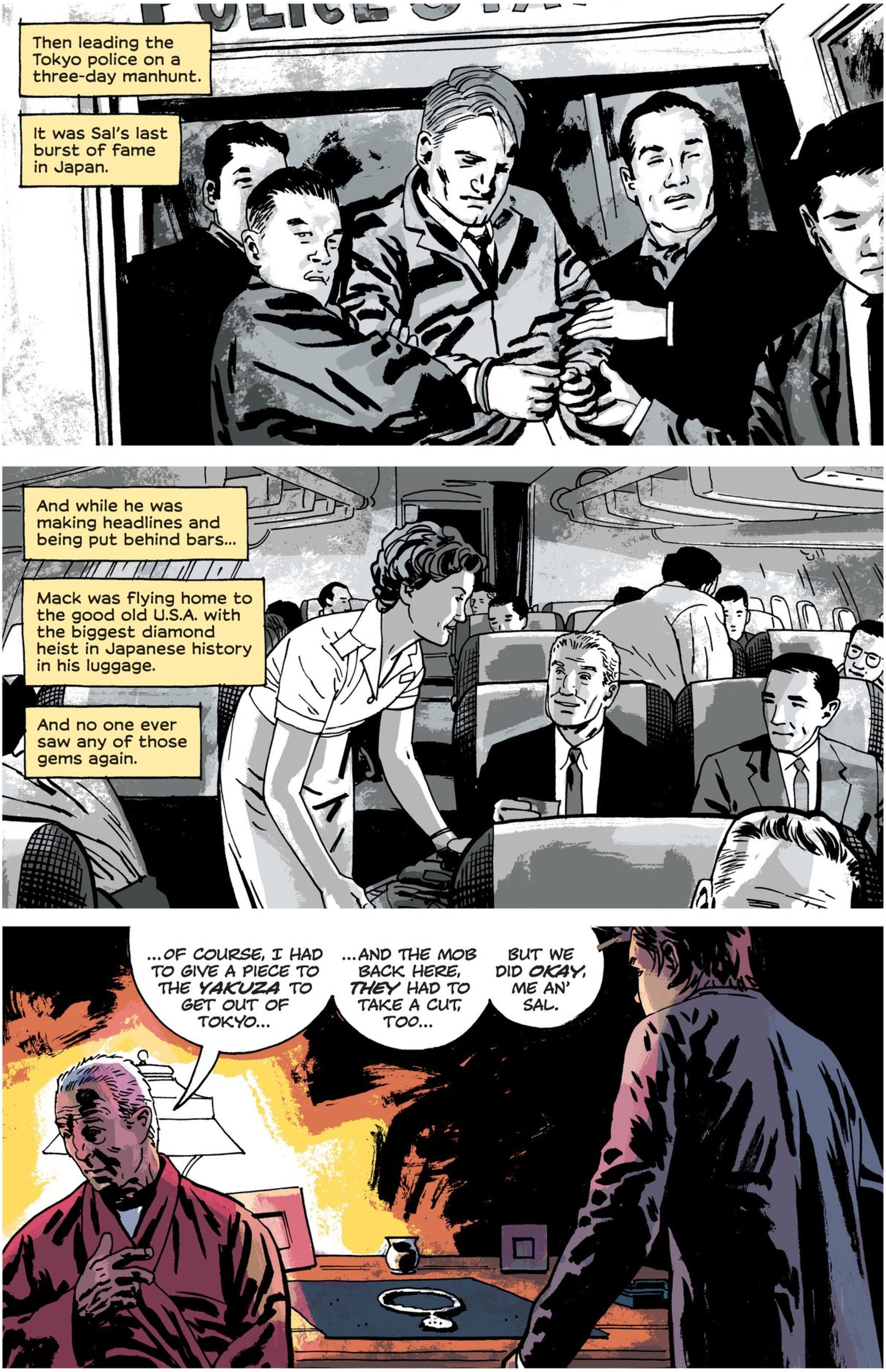

Still, it was a good life.
They stayed at the fanciest hotel in Tokyo and had more booze and women than they could handle.

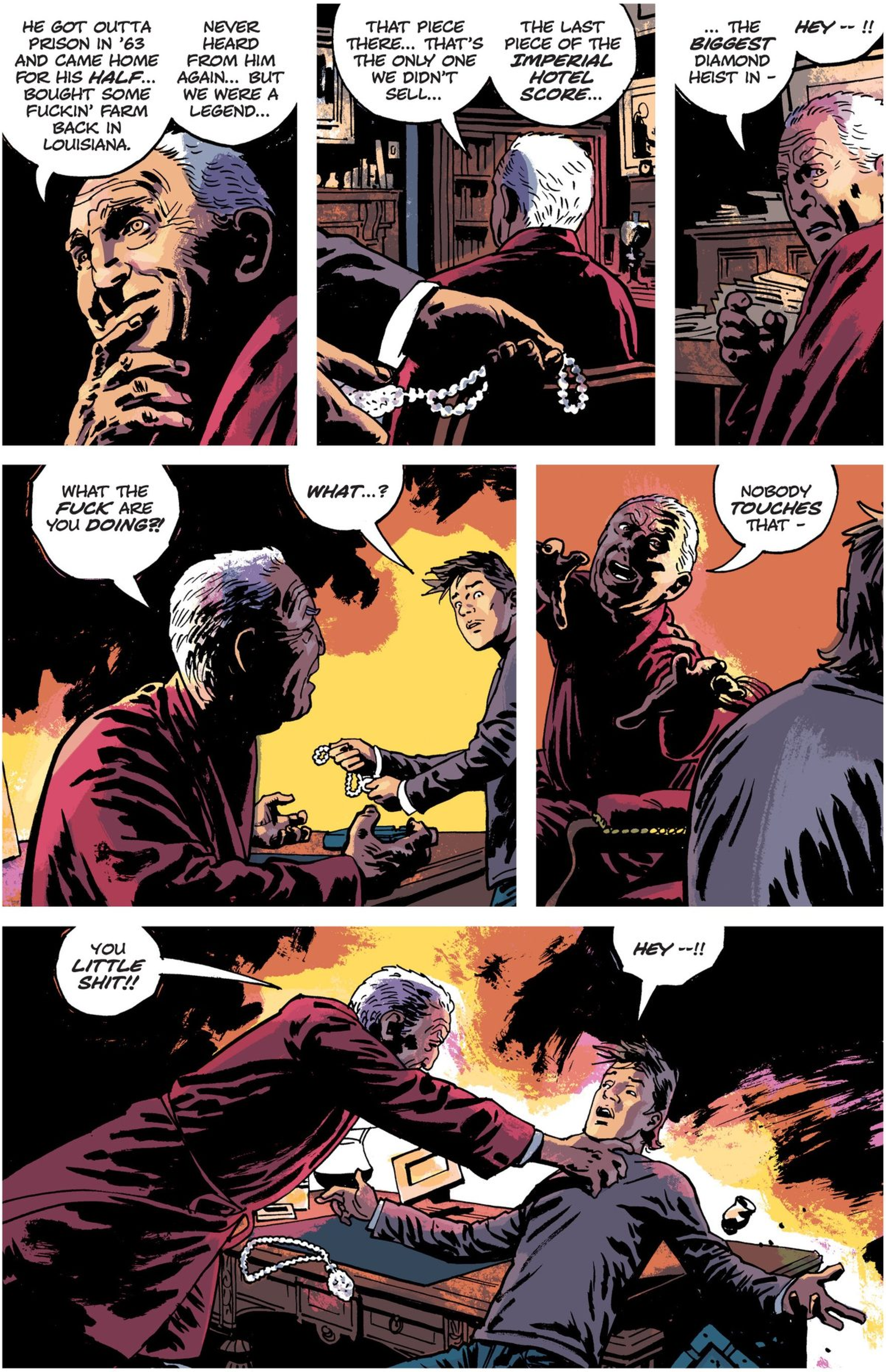

But even with all that, eventually being ***hated*** got to Sal.
There was a clerk at a jewelry store in the hotel arcade who gave him this sneering look every time he walked by...
And that ***look*** just ate away at him... A little bit every day.
So Sal decided they were going back to America...
And before they left, they were going to ***rob*** that jewelry store... and ruin that clerk's life.
It was a simple plan. Only three people needed.
Two to pose as customers, and one to ***transport*** the score.

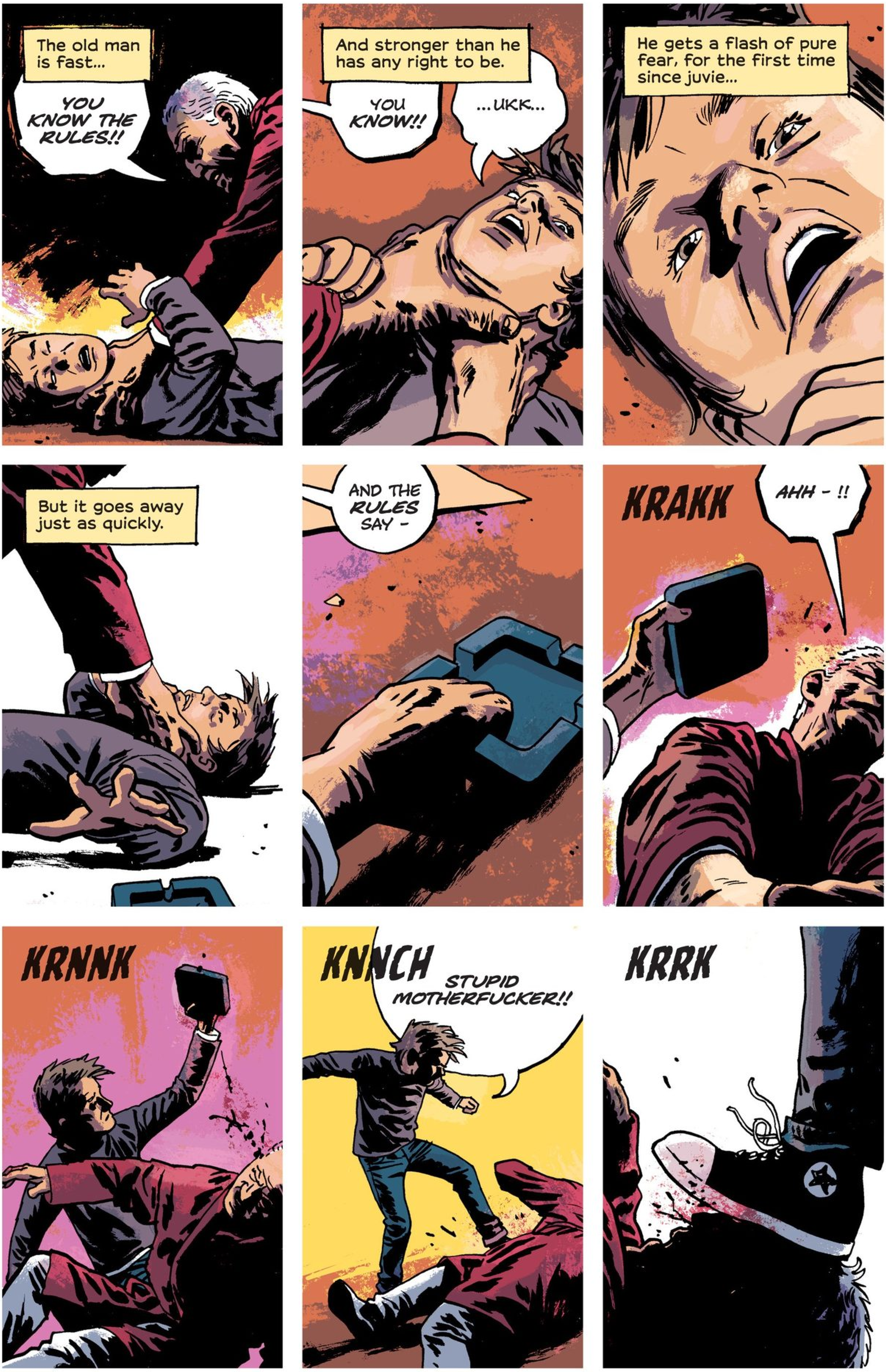

It was the arrogance of the wealthy that made it so simple.
The store often had *private viewings* of their gems for the hotel's rich guests.
So Sal and his girlfriend had the clerk bring a briefcase full of diamonds and rubies right to their room.

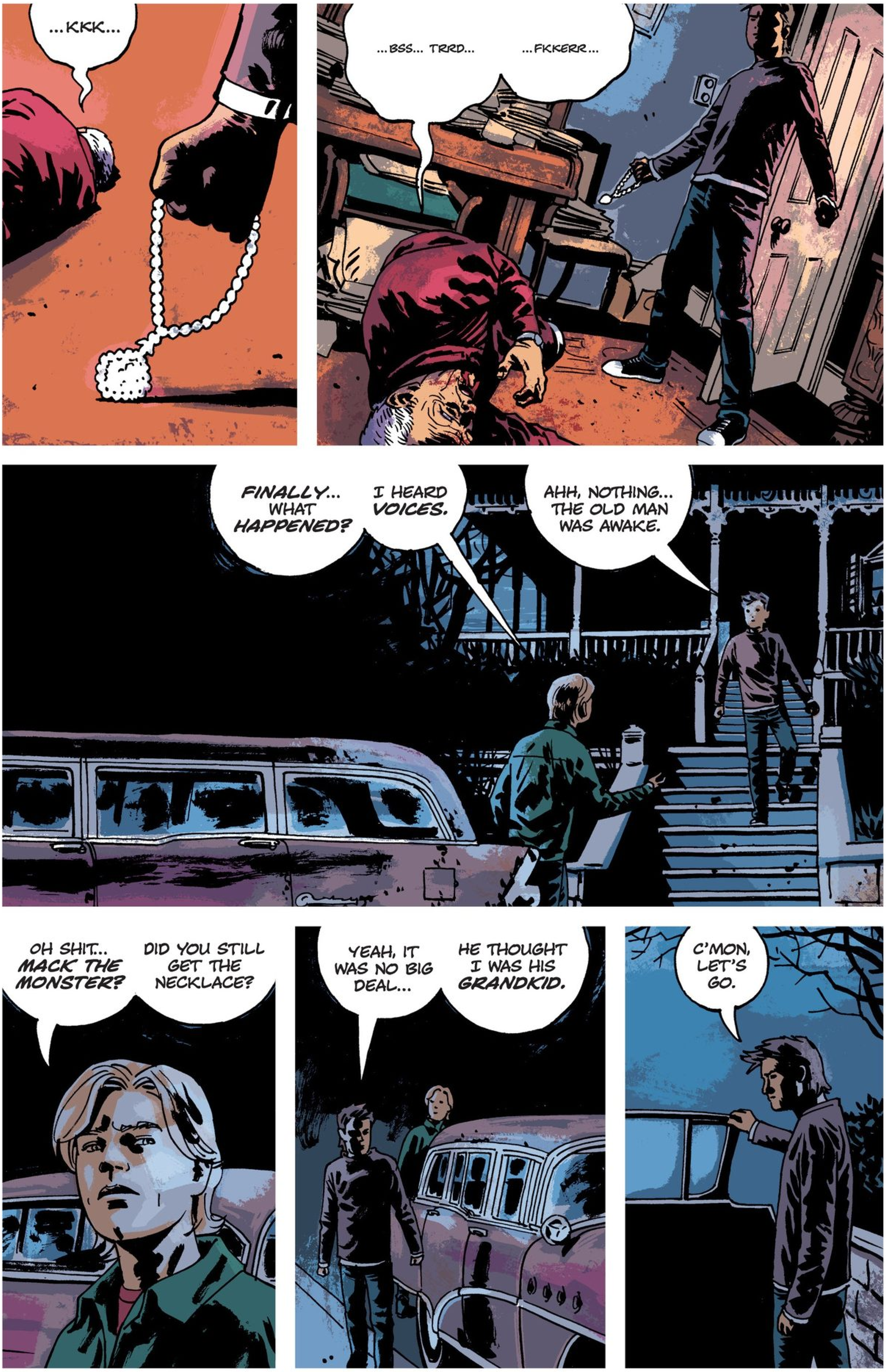

The plan was to drug the guy's tea, and when he passed out, Mack would take the briefcase and head for the airport.
Then Sal and his girl would check out of the hotel and follow on the next plane.

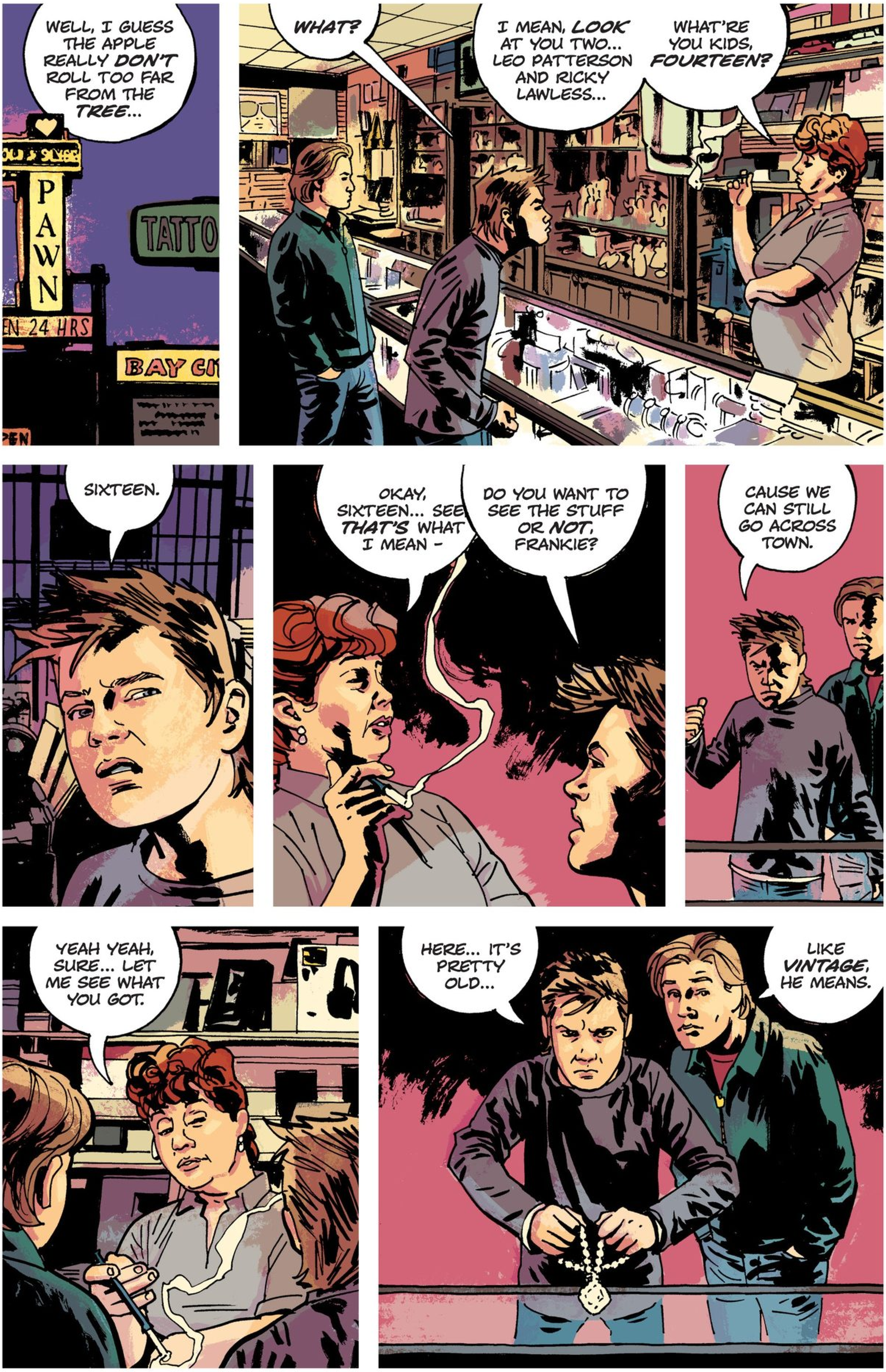

But something went wrong... The drugs didn't work or Sal's anger got the better of him...
But either way, he ended up pistol-whipping the clerk half to death...

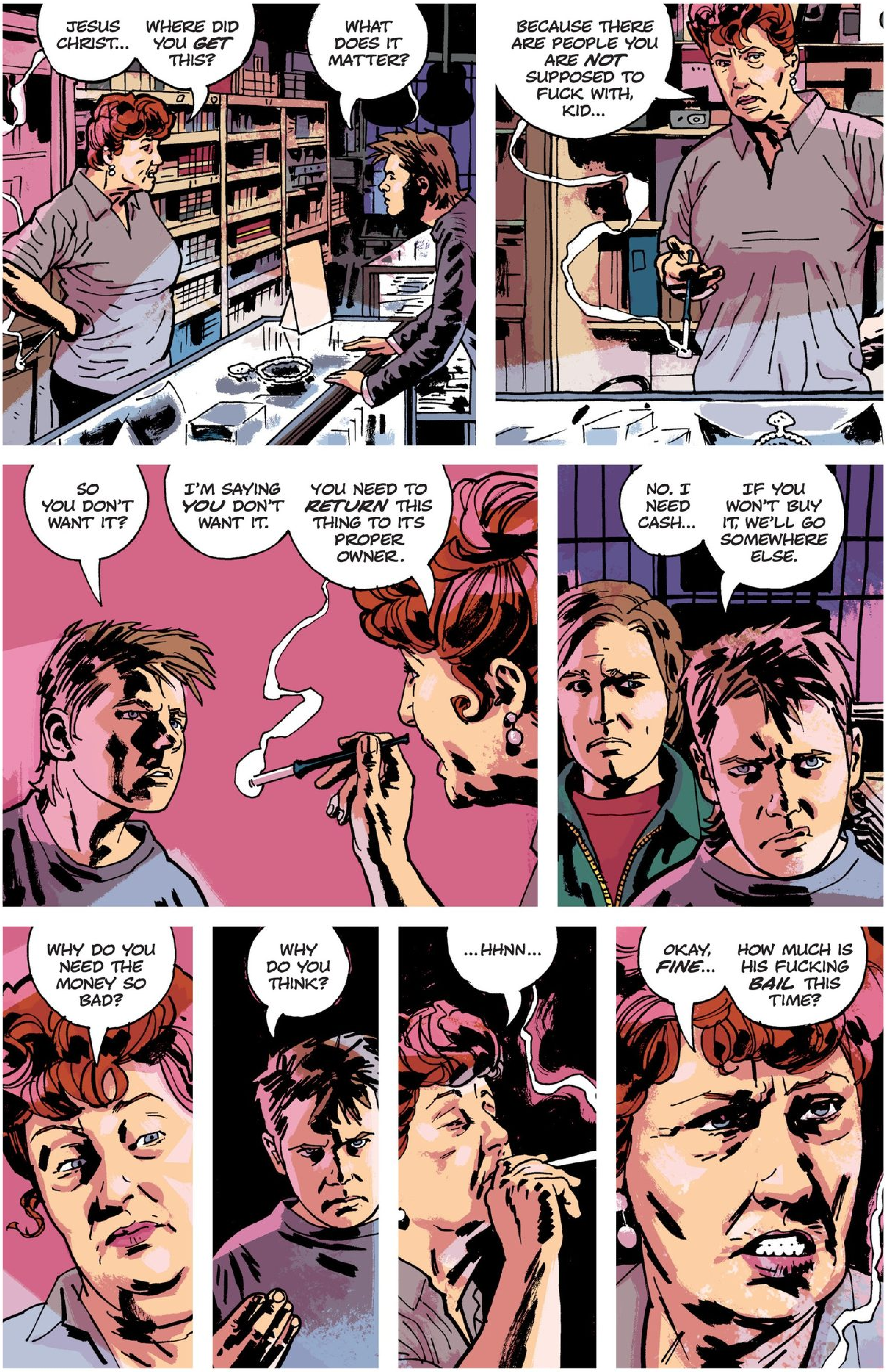

Then leading the Tokyo police on a three-day manhunt.
It was Sal's last burst of fame in Japan.
And while he was making headlines and being put behind bars...
Mack was flying home to the good old U.S.A. with the biggest diamond heist in Japanese history in his luggage.
And no one ever saw any of those gems again.
...OF COURSE, I HAD TO GIVE A PIECE TO THE *YAKUZA* TO GET OUT OF TOKYO...
...AND THE MOB BACK HERE, *THEY* HAD TO TAKE A CUT, TOO...
BUT WE DID *OKAY*, ME AN' SAL.

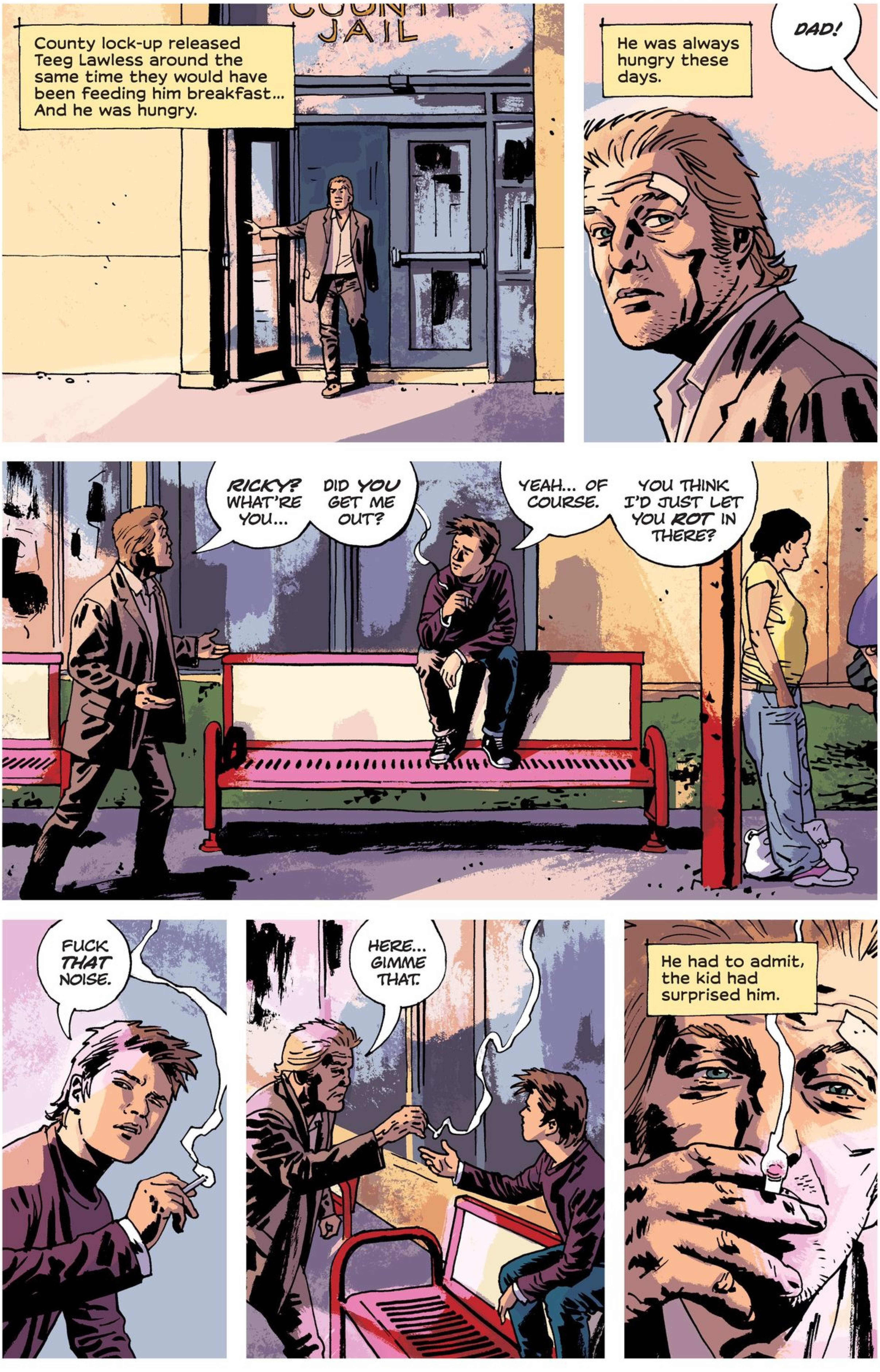

HE GOT OUTTA PRISON IN '63 AND CAME HOME FOR HIS *HALF*... BOUGHT SOME FUCKIN' FARM BACK IN LOUISIANA.
NEVER HEARD FROM HIM AGAIN... BUT WE WERE A LEGEND...
THAT PIECE THERE... THAT'S THE ONLY ONE WE DIDN'T SELL...
THE LAST PIECE OF THE *IMPERIAL HOTEL SCORE*...
... THE *BIGGEST* DIAMOND HEIST IN -
HEY -- !!
WHAT THE *FUCK* ARE YOU *DOING?!*
WHAT...?
NOBODY *TOUCHES* THAT -
YOU *LITTLE SHIT!!*
HEY --!!

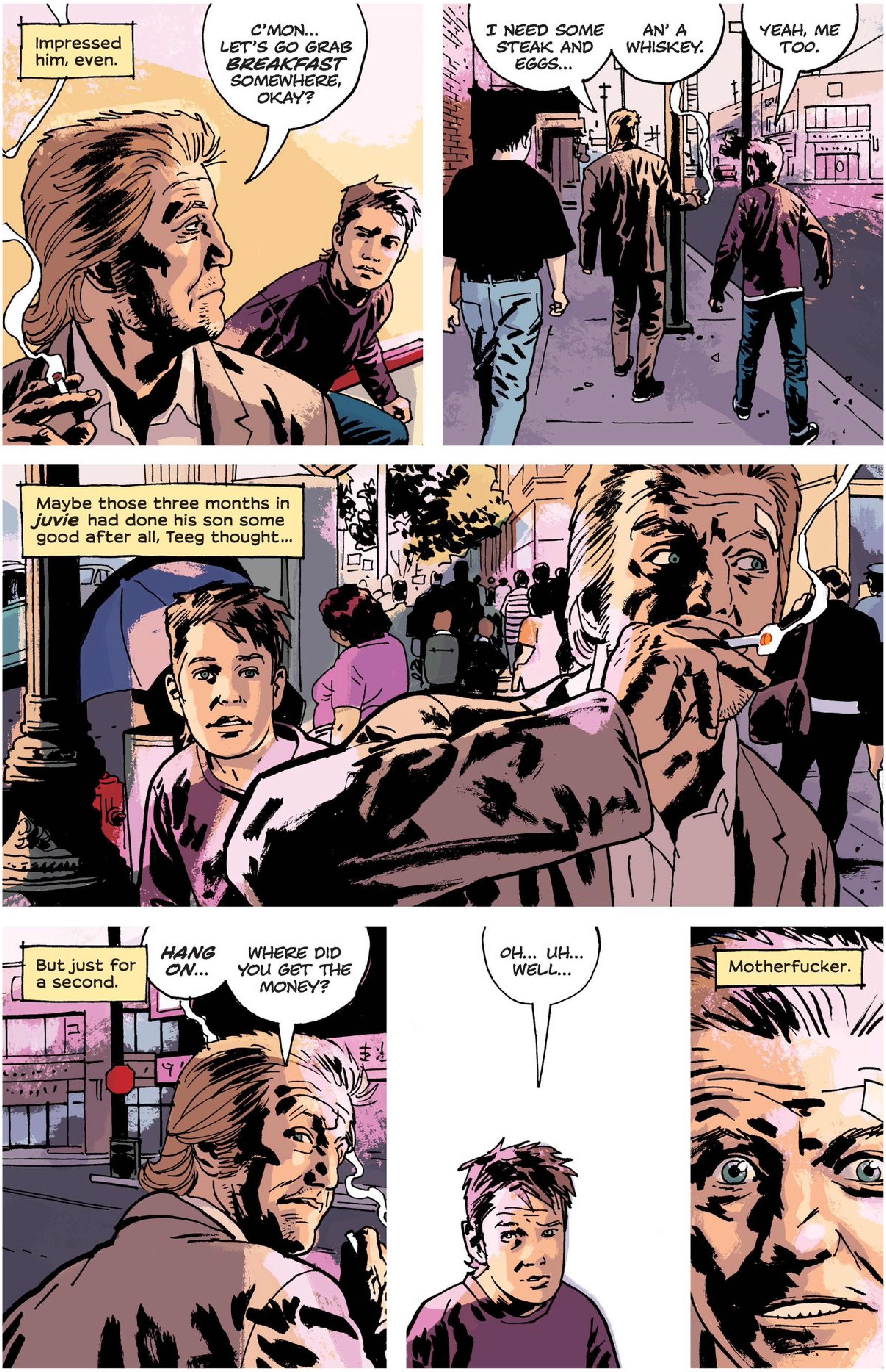

The old man is fast...
YOU KNOW THE RULES!!
And stronger than he has any right to be.
YOU KNOW!!
...UKK...
He gets a flash of pure fear, for the first time since juvie...
But it goes away just as quickly.
AND THE RULES SAY -
KRAKK
AHH - !!
KRNNK
KNNCH
STUPID MOTHERFUCKER!!
KRRK

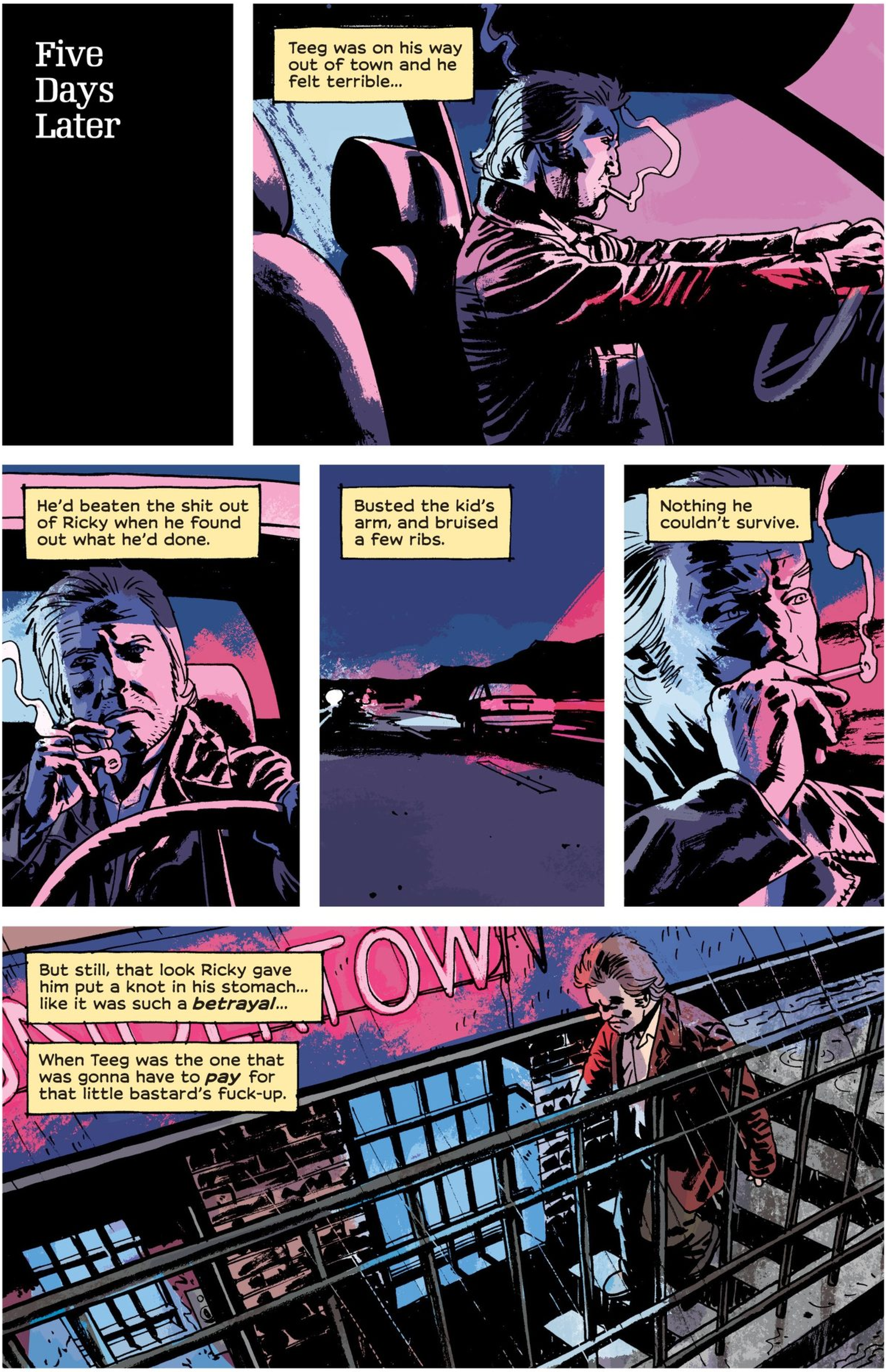

...KKK...
...BSS... TRRD... ...FKKERR...
FINALLY... WHAT HAPPENED? I HEARD VOICES.
AHH, NOTHING... THE OLD MAN WAS AWAKE.
OH SHIT... MACK THE MONSTER? DID YOU STILL GET THE NECKLACE?
YEAH, IT WAS NO BIG DEAL... HE THOUGHT I WAS HIS GRANDKID.
C'MON, LET'S GO.

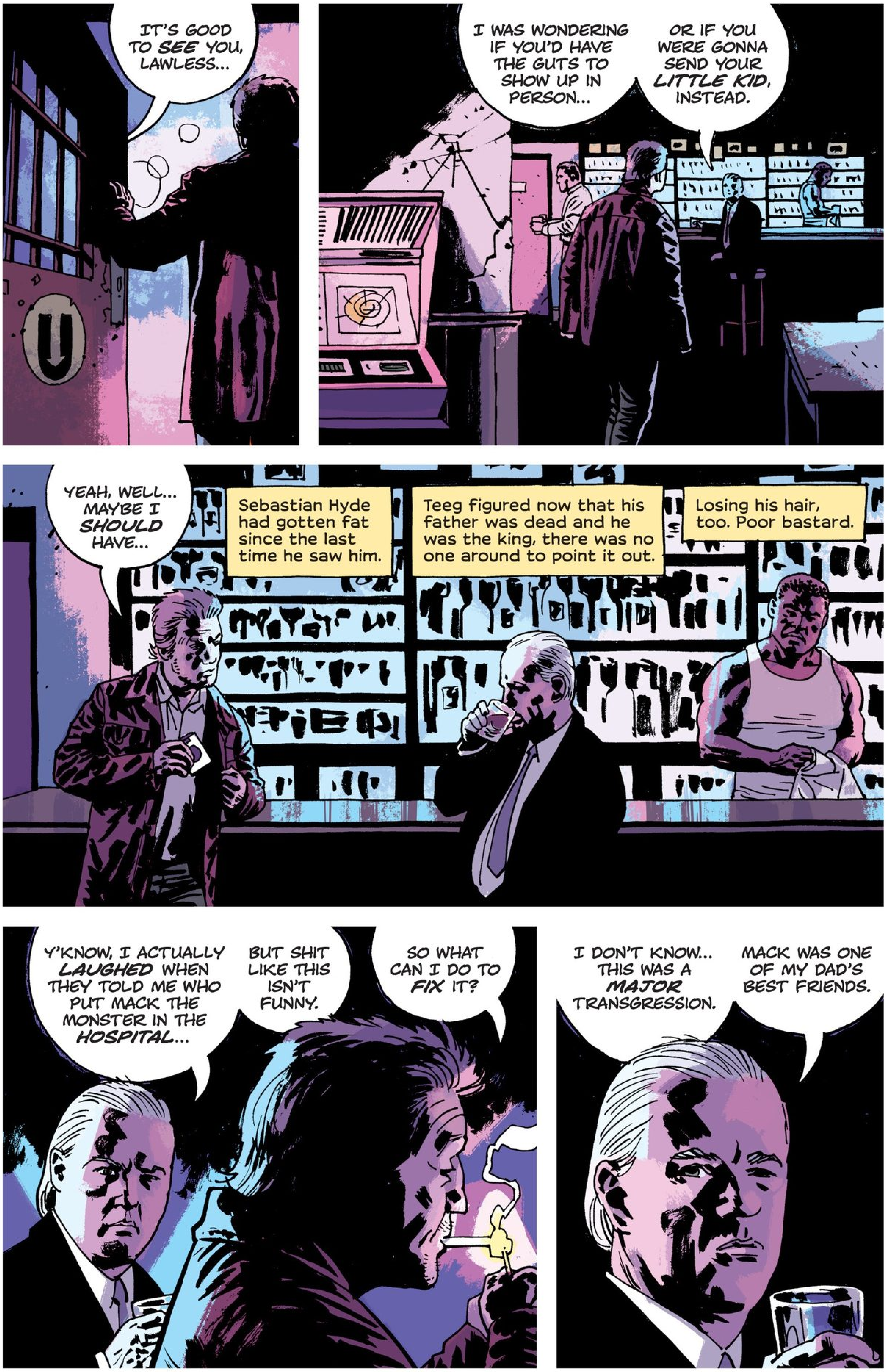

WELL, I GUESS THE APPLE REALLY *DON'T* ROLL TOO FAR FROM THE *TREE*...
PAWN
EN 24 HRS
TATTO
BAY CI
WHAT?
I MEAN, *LOOK* AT YOU TWO... LEO PATTERSON AND RICKY LAWLESS...
WHAT'RE YOU KIDS, *FOURTEEN?*
SIXTEEN.
OKAY, SIXTEEN... SEE *THAT'S* WHAT I MEAN -
DO YOU WANT TO SEE THE STUFF OR *NOT*, FRANKIE?
CAUSE WE CAN STILL GO ACROSS TOWN.
YEAH YEAH, SURE... LET ME SEE WHAT YOU GOT.
HERE... IT'S PRETTY OLD...
LIKE *VINTAGE*, HE MEANS.

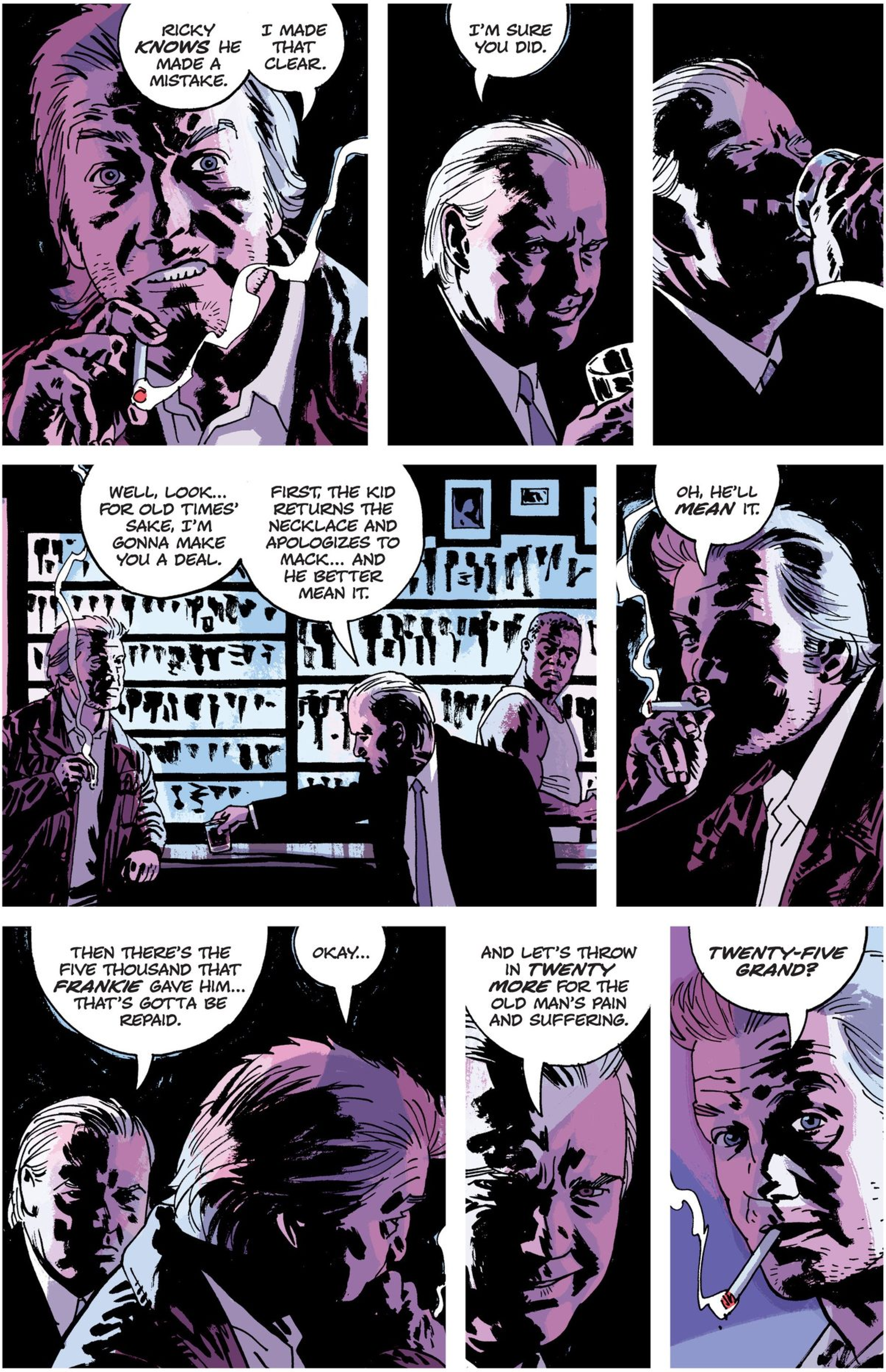

JESUS CHRIST...
WHERE DID YOU *GET* THIS?
WHAT DOES IT MATTER?
BECAUSE THERE ARE PEOPLE YOU ARE *NOT* SUPPOSED TO FUCK WITH, KID...
SO YOU DON'T WANT IT?
I'M SAYING *YOU* DON'T WANT IT.
YOU NEED TO *RETURN* THIS THING TO ITS PROPER OWNER.
NO. I NEED CASH...
IF YOU WON'T BUY IT, WE'LL GO SOMEWHERE ELSE.
WHY DO YOU NEED THE MONEY SO BAD?
WHY DO YOU THINK?
...HHNN...
OKAY, *FINE*...
HOW MUCH IS HIS FUCKING *BAIL* THIS TIME?

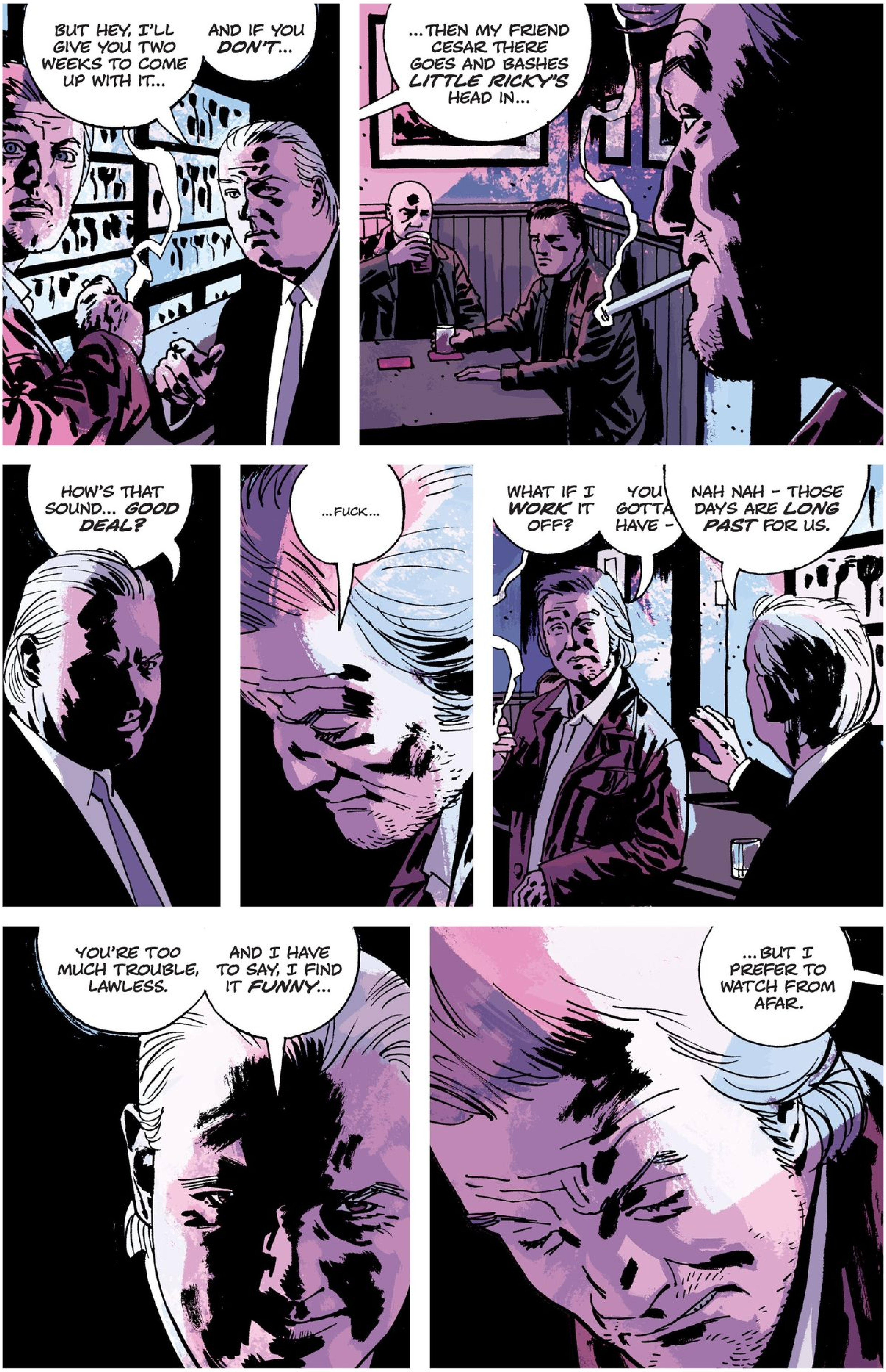

COUNTY JAIL
County lock-up released Teeg Lawless around the same time they would have been feeding him breakfast... And he was hungry.
He was always hungry these days.
DAD!
RICKY? WHAT'RE YOU...
DID YOU GET ME OUT?
YEAH... OF COURSE.
YOU THINK I'D JUST LET YOU ROT IN THERE?
FUCK THAT NOISE.
HERE... GIMME THAT.
He had to admit, the kid had surprised him.

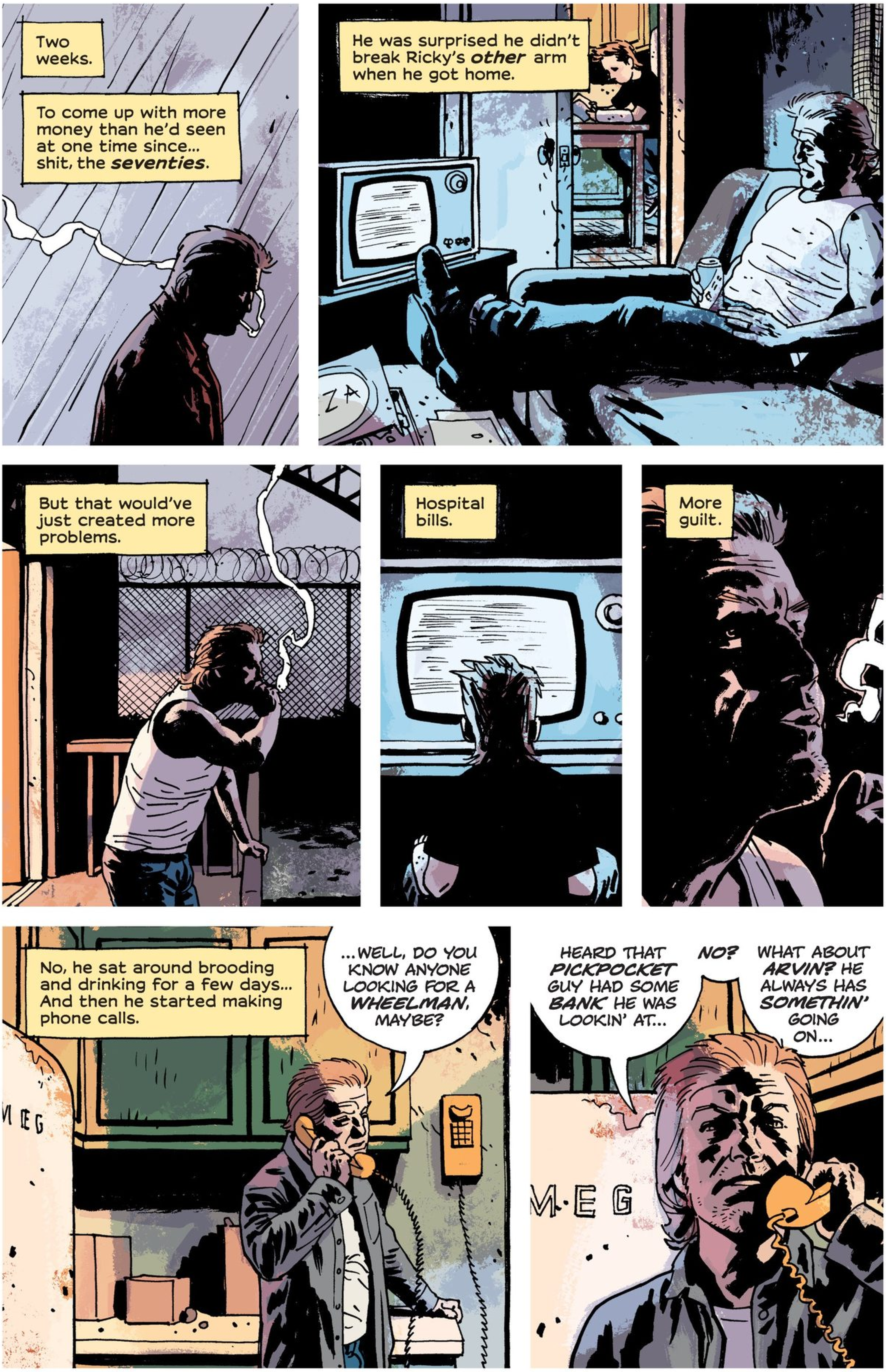

Impressed him, even.
C'MON... LET'S GO GRAB ***BREAKFAST*** SOMEWHERE, OKAY?
I NEED SOME STEAK AND EGGS...
AN' A WHISKEY.
YEAH, ME TOO.
Maybe those three months in ***juvie*** had done his son some good after all, Teeg thought...
But just for a second.
HANG ON...
WHERE DID YOU GET THE MONEY?
OH... UH... WELL...
Motherfucker.

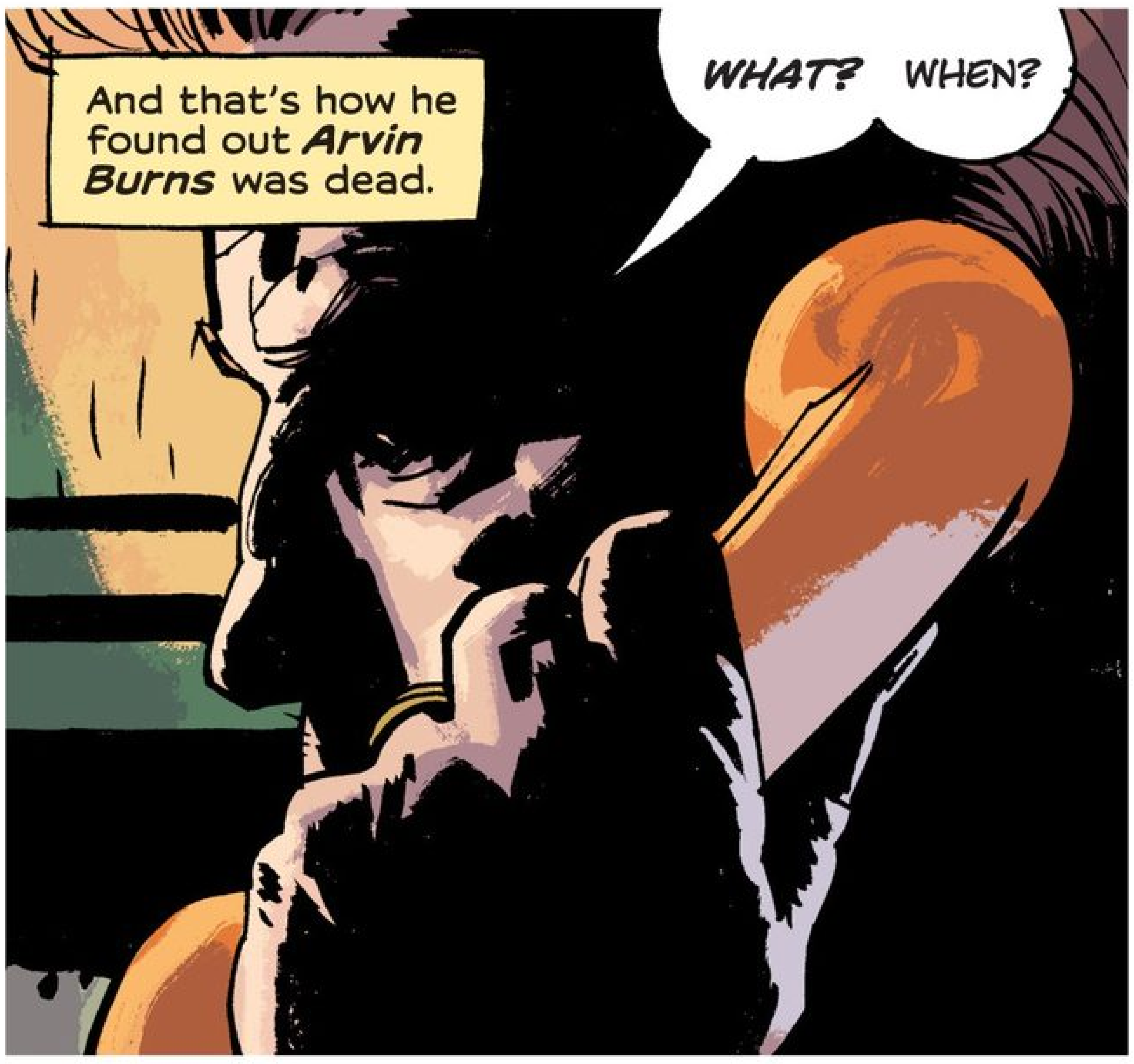

Five Days Later
Teeg was on his way out of town and he felt terrible...
He'd beaten the shit out of Ricky when he found out what he'd done.
Busted the kid's arm, and bruised a few ribs.
Nothing he couldn't survive.
TOWN
But still, that look Ricky gave him put a knot in his stomach... like it was such a ***betrayal***...
When Teeg was the one that was gonna have to ***pay*** for that little bastard's fuck-up.

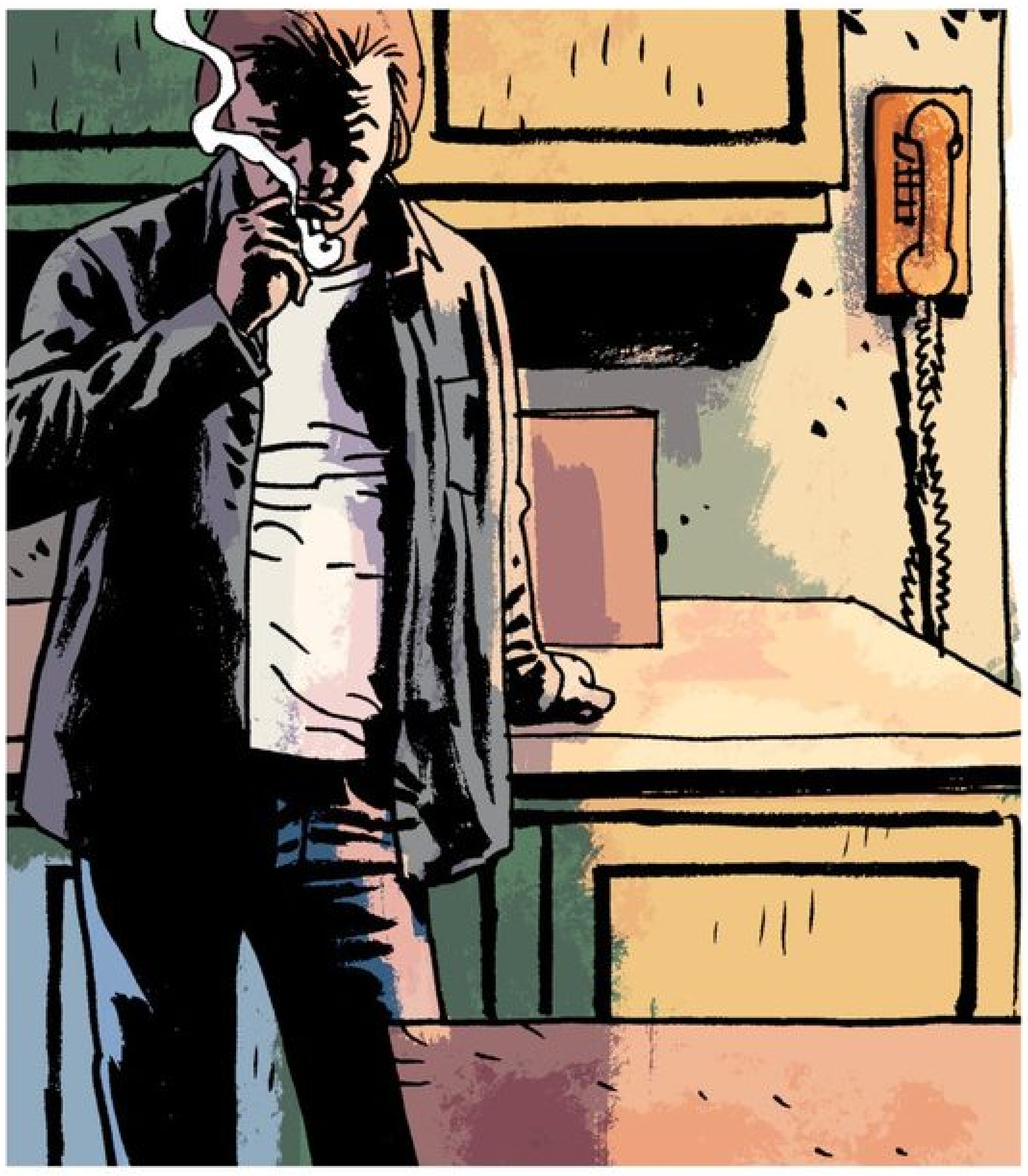

IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU, LAWLESS...
I WAS WONDERING IF YOU'D HAVE THE GUTS TO SHOW UP IN PERSON...
OR IF YOU WERE GONNA SEND YOUR LITTLE KID, INSTEAD.
YEAH, WELL... MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE...
Sebastian Hyde had gotten fat since the last time he saw him.
Teeg figured now that his father was dead and he was the king, there was no one around to point it out.
Losing his hair, too. Poor bastard.
Y'KNOW, I ACTUALLY LAUGHED WHEN THEY TOLD ME WHO PUT MACK THE MONSTER IN THE HOSPITAL...
BUT SHIT LIKE THIS ISN'T FUNNY.
SO WHAT CAN I DO TO FIX IT?
I DON'T KNOW... THIS WAS A MAJOR TRANSGRESSION.
MACK WAS ONE OF MY DAD'S BEST FRIENDS.

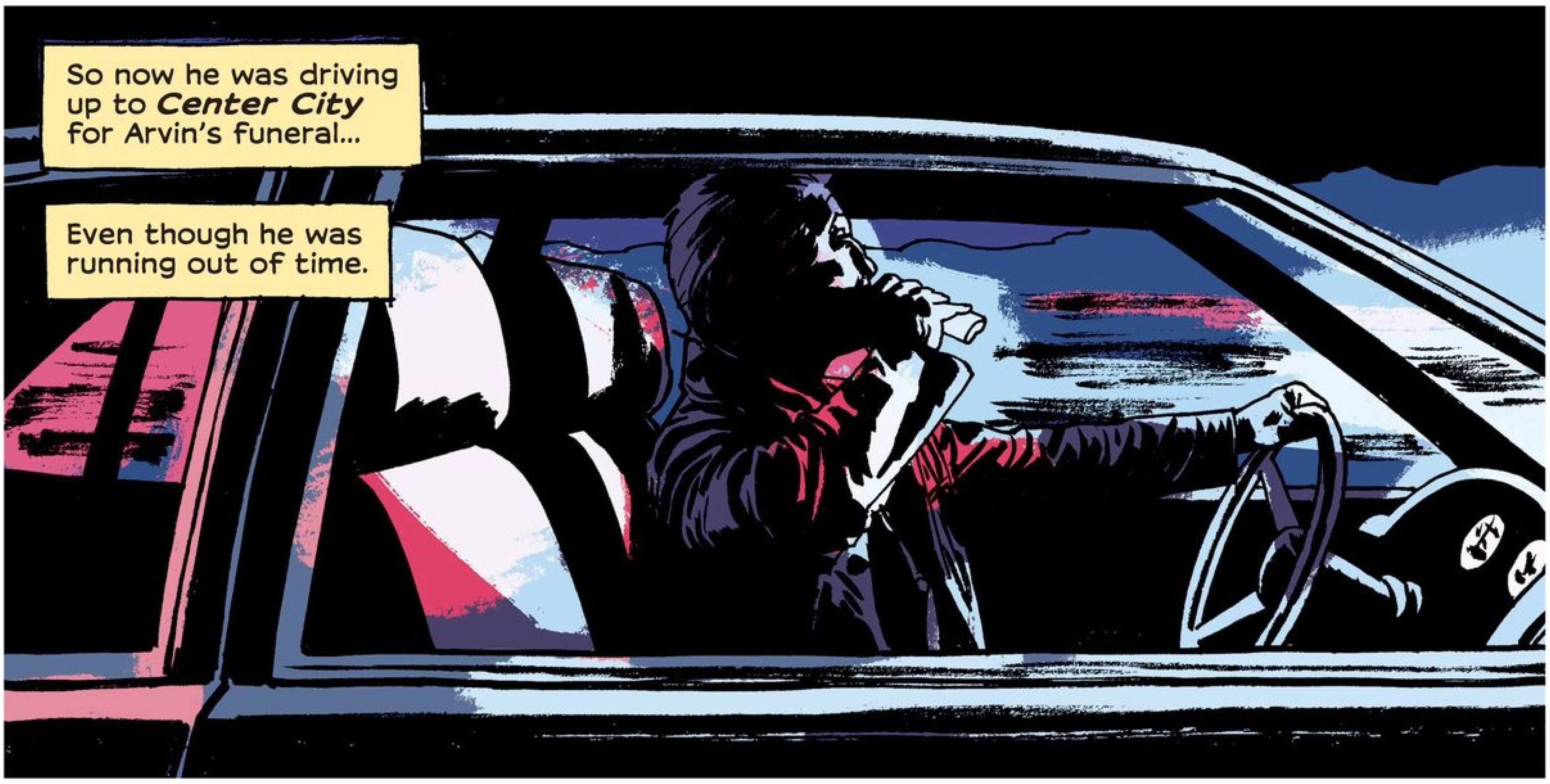

RICKY *KNOWS* HE MADE A MISTAKE.
I MADE THAT CLEAR.
I'M SURE YOU DID.
WELL, LOOK... FOR OLD TIMES' SAKE, I'M GONNA MAKE YOU A DEAL.
FIRST, THE KID RETURNS THE NECKLACE AND APOLOGIZES TO MACK... AND HE BETTER MEAN IT.
OH, HE'LL *MEAN* IT.
THEN THERE'S THE FIVE THOUSAND THAT *FRANKIE* GAVE HIM... THAT'S GOTTA BE REPAID.
OKAY...
AND LET'S THROW IN *TWENTY MORE* FOR THE OLD MAN'S PAIN AND SUFFERING.
TWENTY-FIVE GRAND?

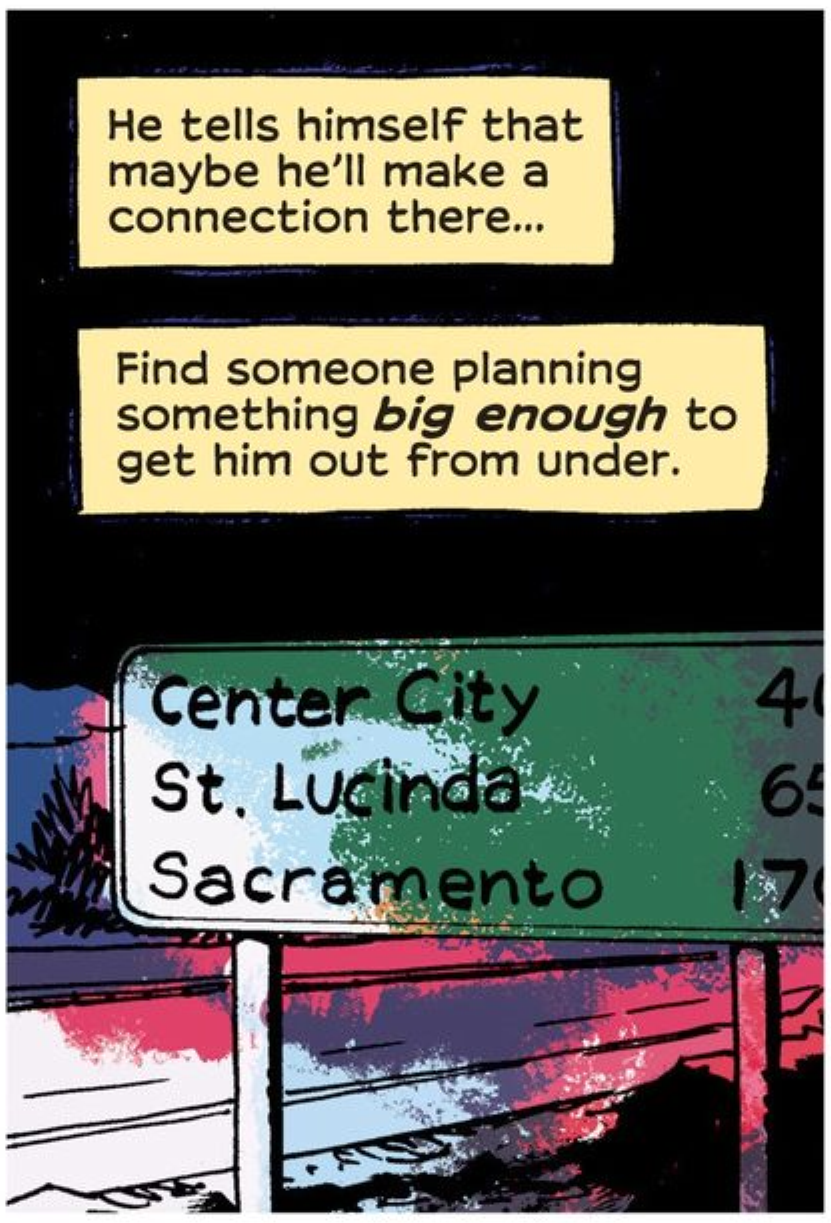

BUT HEY, I'LL GIVE YOU TWO WEEKS TO COME UP WITH IT...
AND IF YOU *DON'T*...
...THEN MY FRIEND CESAR THERE GOES AND BASHES *LITTLE RICKY'S* HEAD IN...
HOW'S THAT SOUND... *GOOD DEAL?*
...FUCK...
WHAT IF I *WORK* IT OFF?
YOU GOTTA HAVE -
NAH NAH - THOSE DAYS ARE *LONG PAST* FOR US.
YOU'RE TOO MUCH TROUBLE, LAWLESS.
AND I HAVE TO SAY, I FIND IT *FUNNY*...
...BUT I PREFER TO WATCH FROM AFAR.

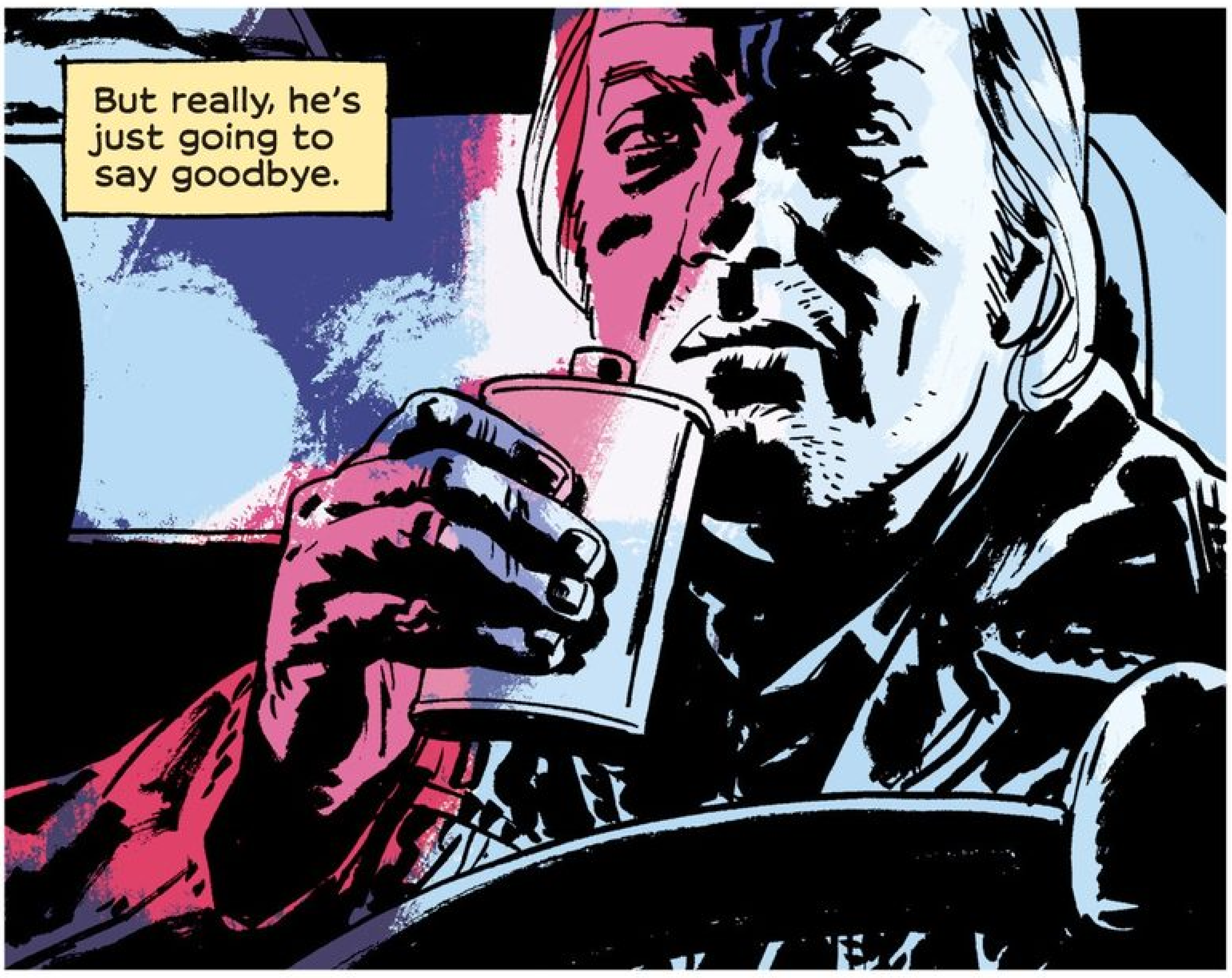

Two weeks.
To come up with more money than he'd seen at one time since... shit, the *seventies*.
He was surprised he didn't break Ricky's *other* arm when he got home.
ZA
But that would've just created more problems.
Hospital bills.
More guilt.
No, he sat around brooding and drinking for a few days... And then he started making phone calls.
...WELL, DO YOU KNOW ANYONE LOOKING FOR A *WHEELMAN*, MAYBE?
M EG
HEARD THAT *PICKPOCKET* GUY HAD SOME *BANK* HE WAS LOOKIN' AT...
NO?
WHAT ABOUT *ARVIN?* HE ALWAYS HAS *SOMETHIN'* GOING ON...
M·E G

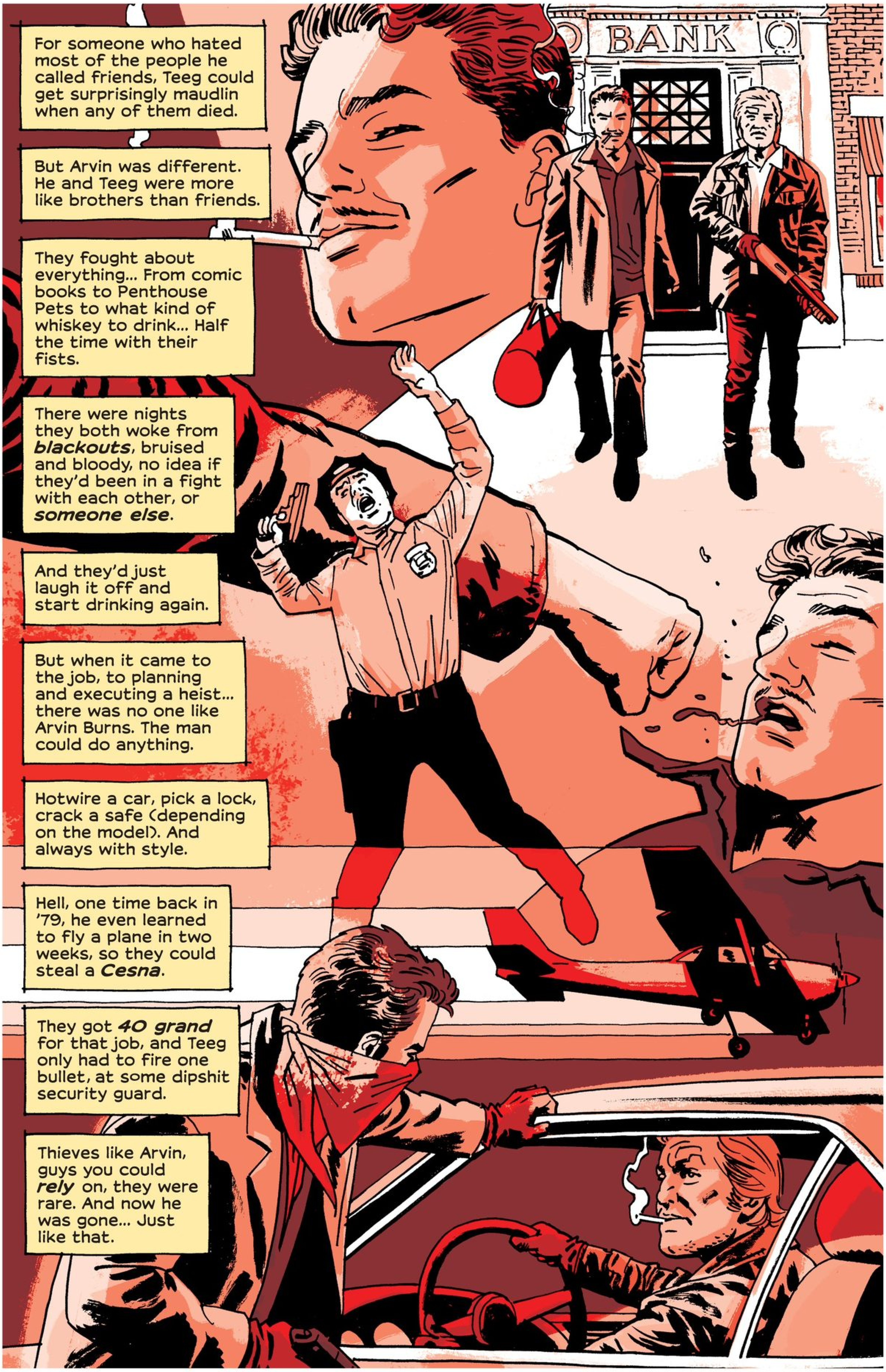

And that's how he found out ***Arvin Burns*** was dead.
WHAT? WHEN?

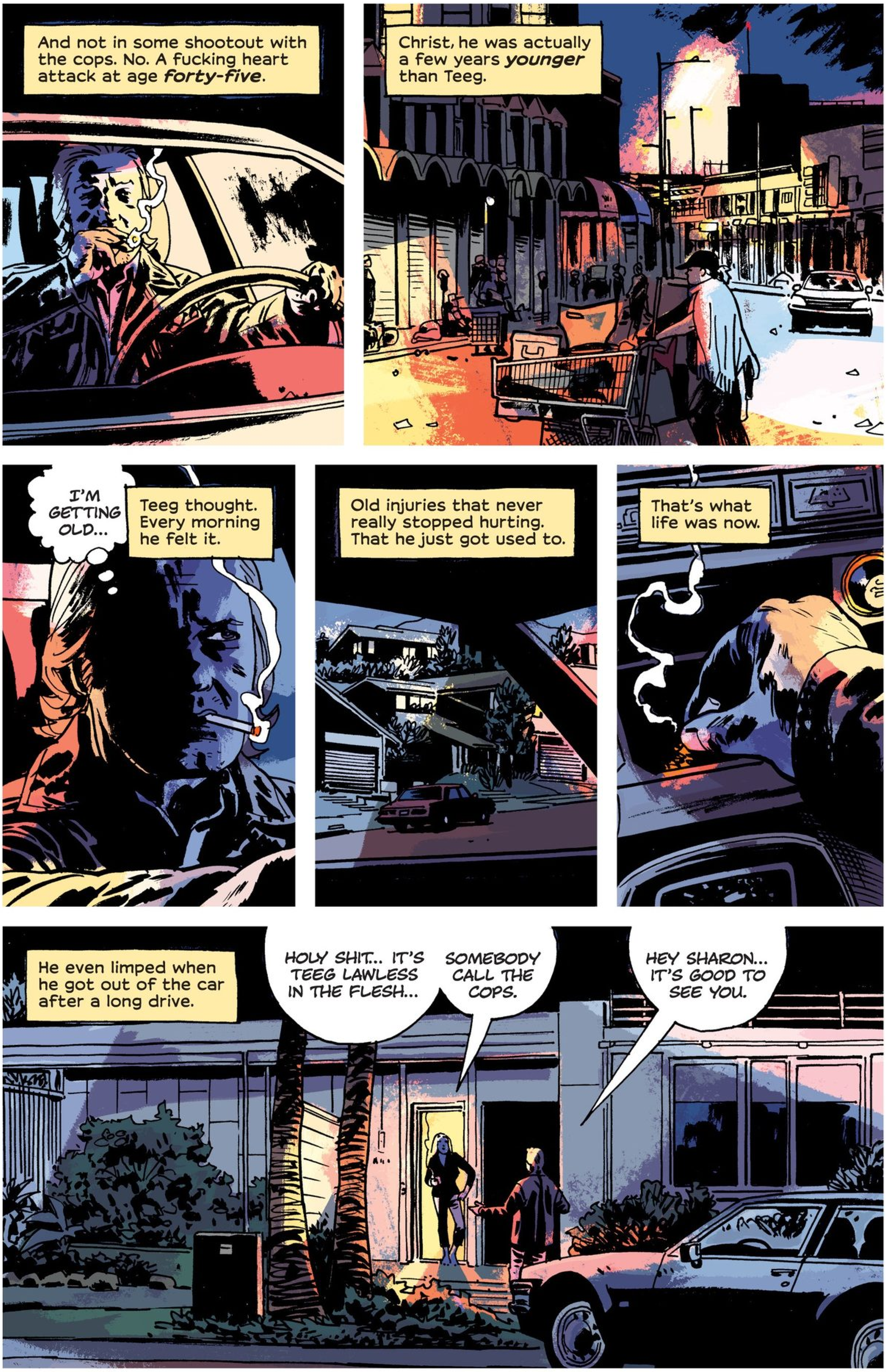


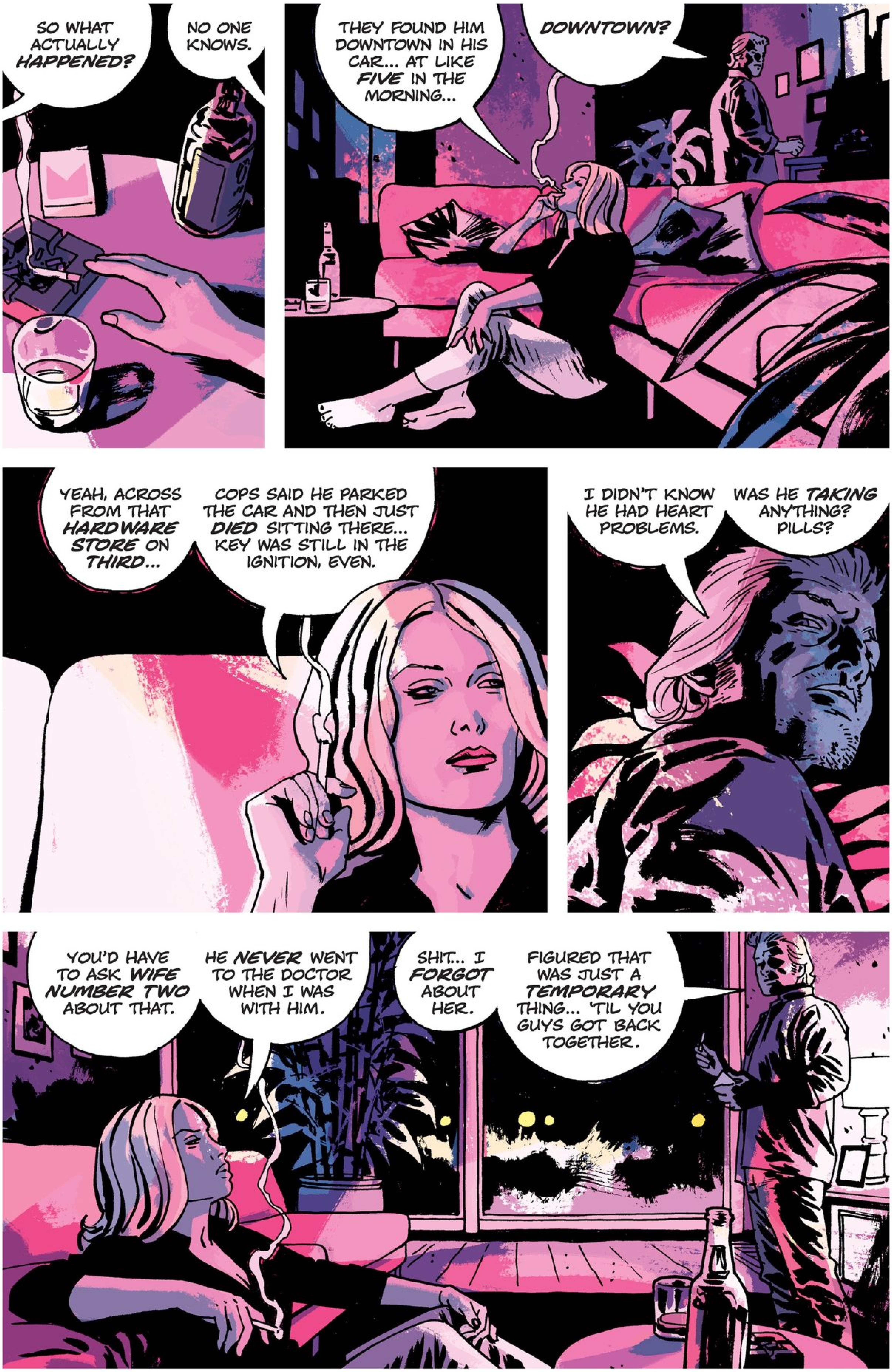

So now he was driving up to ***Center City*** for Arvin's funeral...
Even though he was running out of time.

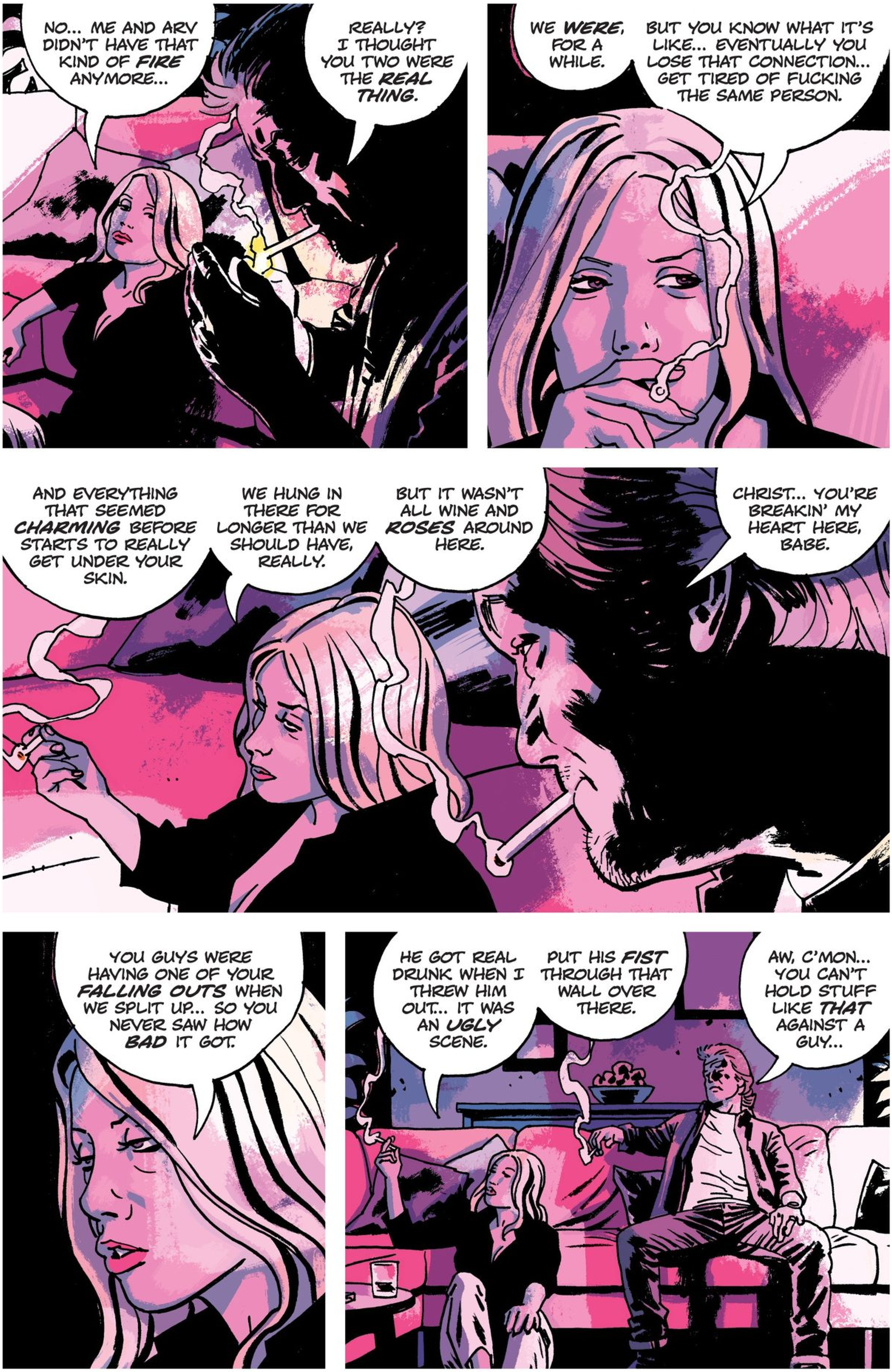

He tells himself that maybe he'll make a connection there...
Find someone planning something ***big enough*** to get him out from under.
Center City 4
St. Lucinda 65
Sacramento 17

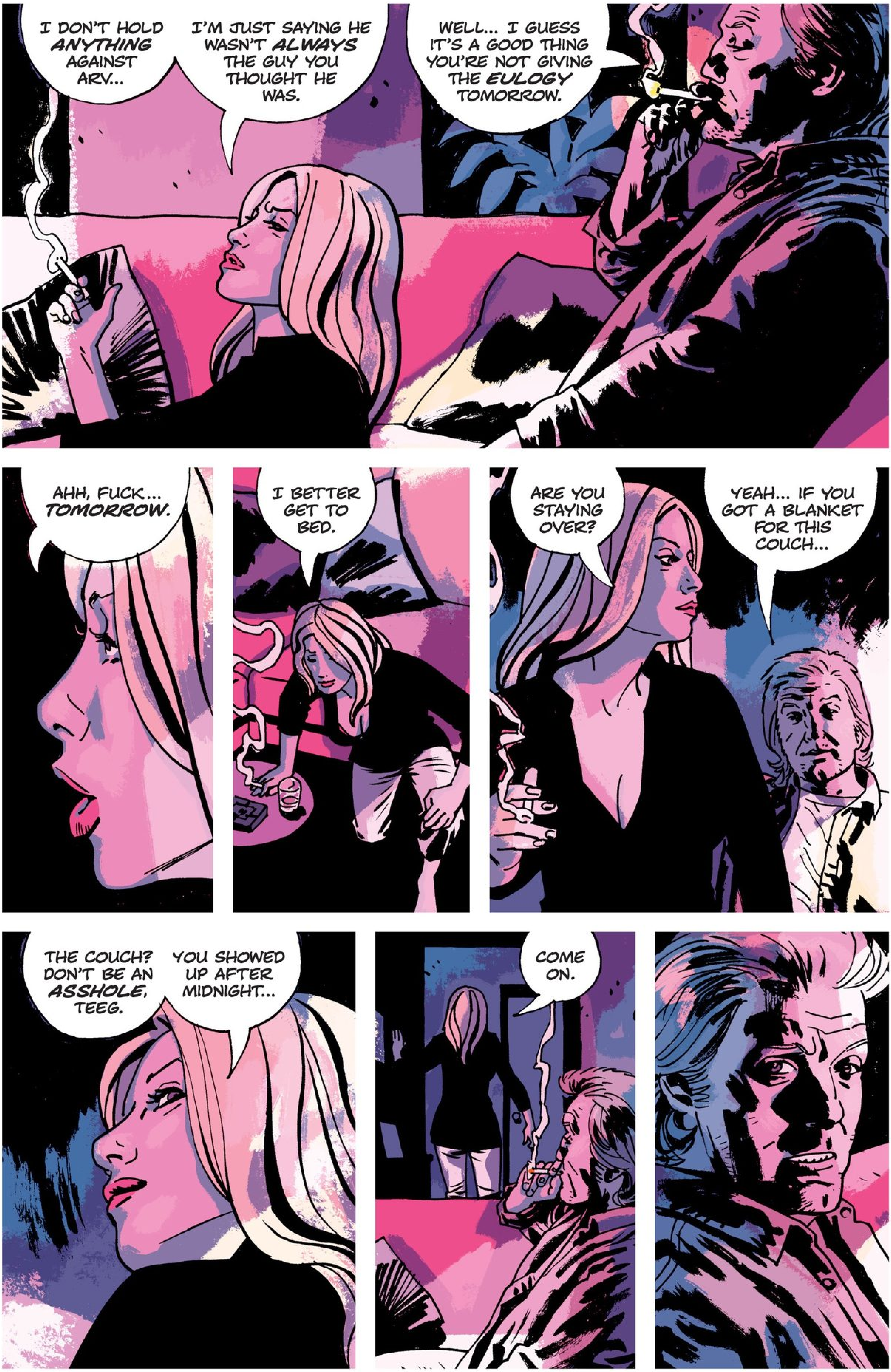

But really, he's just going to say goodbye.

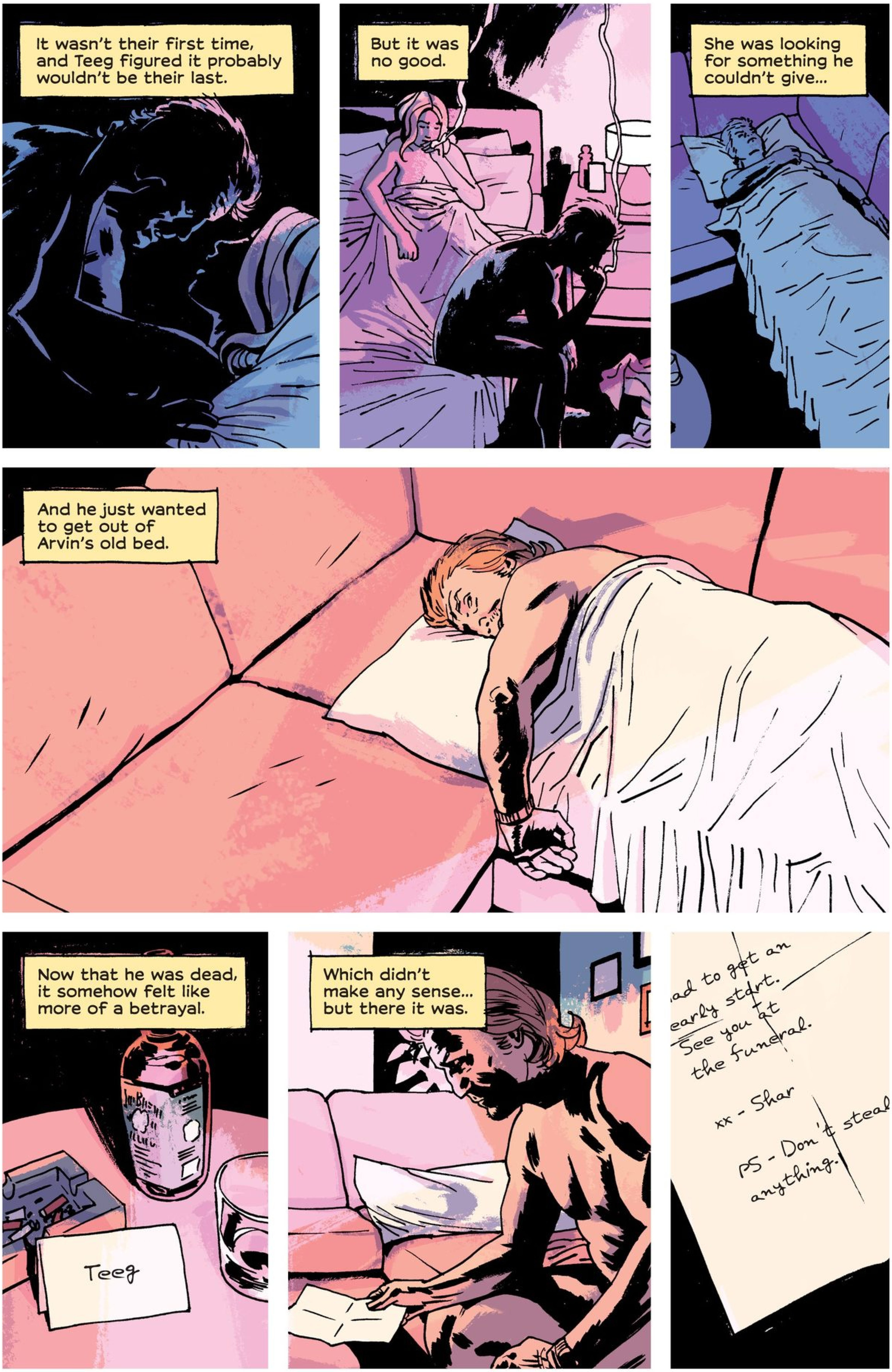

For someone who hated most of the people he called friends, Teeg could get surprisingly maudlin when any of them died.
BANK
But Arvin was different. He and Teeg were more like brothers than friends.
They fought about everything... From comic books to Penthouse Pets to what kind of whiskey to drink... Half the time with their fists.
There were nights they both woke from ***blackouts***, bruised and bloody, no idea if they'd been in a fight with each other, or ***someone else***.
And they'd just laugh it off and start drinking again.
But when it came to the job, to planning and executing a heist... there was no one like Arvin Burns. The man could do anything.
Hotwire a car, pick a lock, crack a safe (depending on the model). And always with style.
Hell, one time back in '79, he even learned to fly a plane in two weeks, so they could steal a ***Cesna***.
They got ***40 grand*** for that job, and Teeg only had to fire one bullet, at some dipshit security guard.
Thieves like Arvin, guys you could ***rely*** on, they were rare. And now he was gone... Just like that.

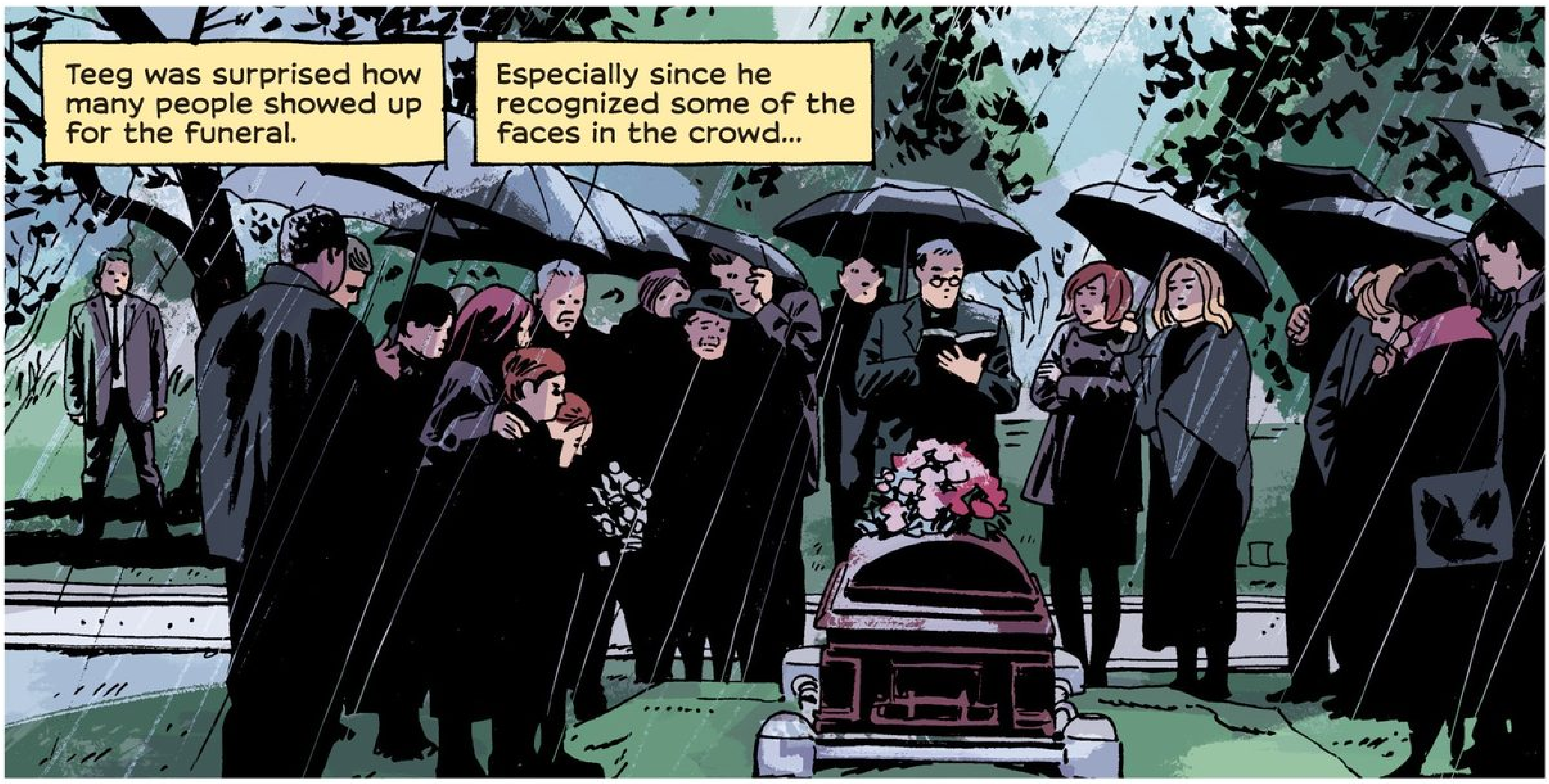

And not in some shootout with the cops. No. A fucking heart attack at age *forty-five*.
Christ, he was actually a few years *younger* than Teeg.
I'M GETTING OLD...
Teeg thought. Every morning he felt it.
Old injuries that never really stopped hurting. That he just got used to.
That's what life was now.
He even limped when he got out of the car after a long drive.
HOLY SHIT... IT'S TEEG LAWLESS IN THE FLESH...
SOMEBODY CALL THE COPS.
HEY SHARON... IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU.

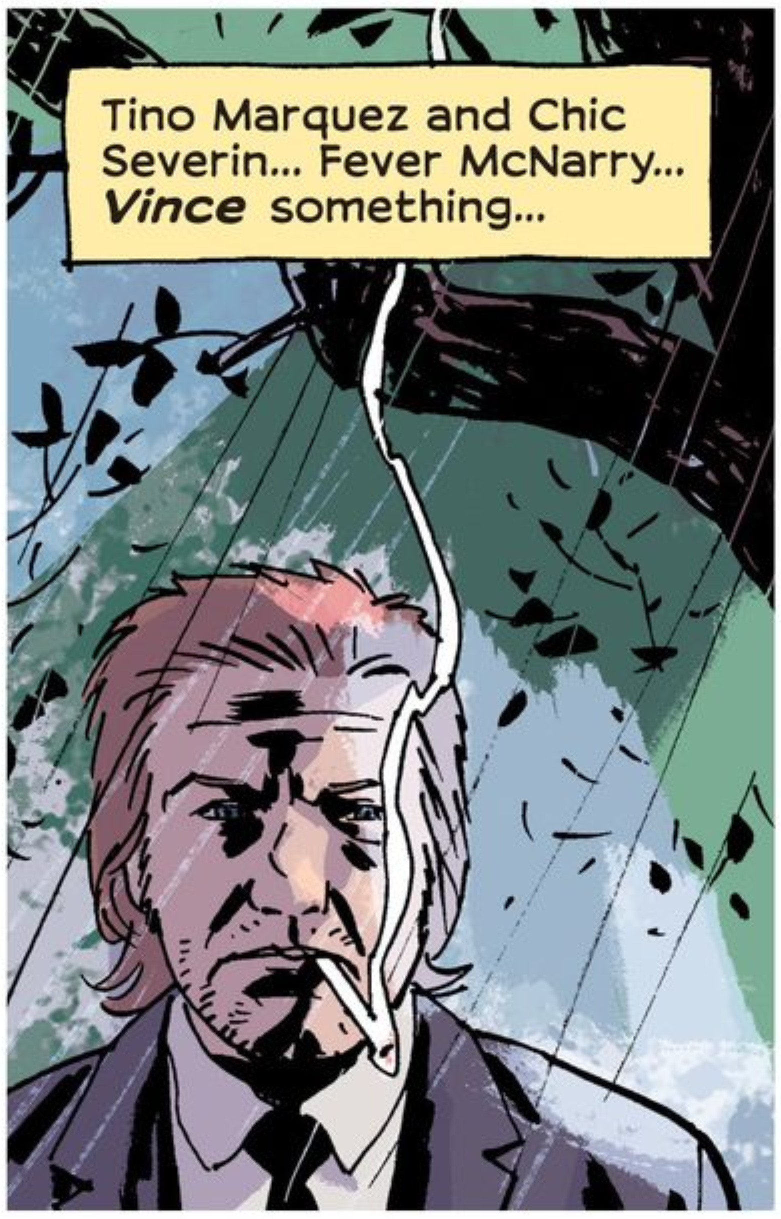

SO WHAT ACTUALLY *HAPPENED?*
NO ONE KNOWS.
THEY FOUND HIM DOWNTOWN IN HIS CAR... AT LIKE *FIVE* IN THE MORNING...
DOWNTOWN?
YEAH, ACROSS FROM THAT *HARDWARE STORE* ON *THIRD*...
COPS SAID HE PARKED THE CAR AND THEN JUST *DIED* SITTING THERE... KEY WAS STILL IN THE IGNITION, EVEN.
I DIDN'T KNOW HE HAD HEART PROBLEMS.
WAS HE *TAKING* ANYTHING? PILLS?
YOU'D HAVE TO ASK *WIFE NUMBER TWO* ABOUT THAT.
HE *NEVER* WENT TO THE DOCTOR WHEN I WAS WITH HIM.
SHIT... I *FORGOT* ABOUT HER.
FIGURED THAT WAS JUST A *TEMPORARY* THING... 'TIL YOU GUYS GOT BACK TOGETHER.

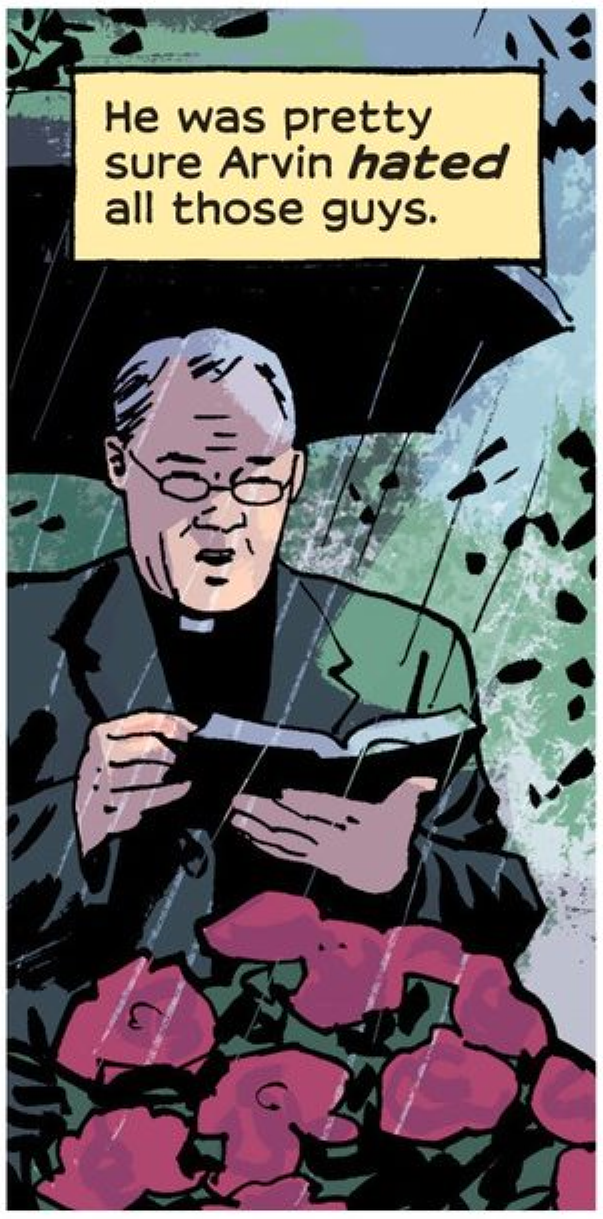

NO... ME AND ARV DIDN'T HAVE THAT KIND OF *FIRE* ANYMORE...
REALLY? I THOUGHT YOU TWO WERE THE *REAL THING.*
WE *WERE,* FOR A WHILE.
BUT YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE... EVENTUALLY YOU LOSE THAT CONNECTION... GET TIRED OF FUCKING THE SAME PERSON.
AND EVERYTHING THAT SEEMED *CHARMING* BEFORE STARTS TO REALLY GET UNDER YOUR SKIN.
WE HUNG IN THERE FOR LONGER THAN WE SHOULD HAVE, REALLY.
BUT IT WASN'T ALL WINE AND *ROSES* AROUND HERE.
CHRIST... YOU'RE BREAKIN' MY HEART HERE, BABE.
YOU GUYS WERE HAVING ONE OF YOUR *FALLING OUTS* WHEN WE SPLIT UP... SO YOU NEVER SAW HOW *BAD* IT GOT.
HE GOT REAL DRUNK WHEN I THREW HIM OUT... IT WAS AN *UGLY* SCENE.
PUT HIS *FIST* THROUGH THAT WALL OVER THERE.
AW, C'MON... YOU CAN'T HOLD STUFF LIKE *THAT* AGAINST A GUY...

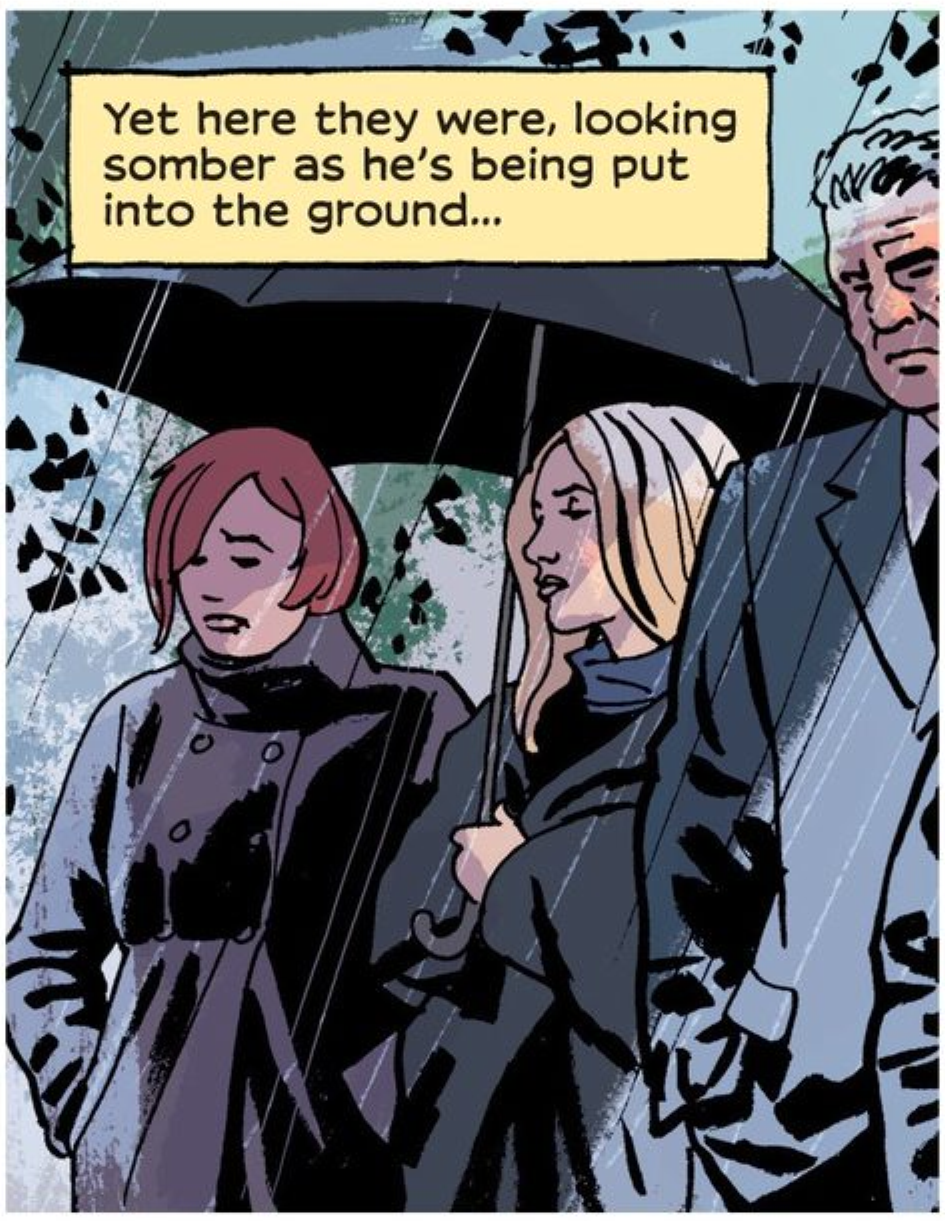

I DON'T HOLD *ANYTHING* AGAINST ARV...
I'M JUST SAYING HE WASN'T *ALWAYS* THE GUY YOU THOUGHT HE WAS.
WELL... I GUESS IT'S A GOOD THING YOU'RE NOT GIVING THE *EULOGY* TOMORROW.
AHH, FUCK... *TOMORROW*.
I BETTER GET TO BED.
ARE YOU STAYING OVER?
YEAH... IF YOU GOT A BLANKET FOR THIS COUCH...
THE COUCH? DON'T BE AN *ASSHOLE*, TEEG.
YOU SHOWED UP AFTER MIDNIGHT...
COME ON.

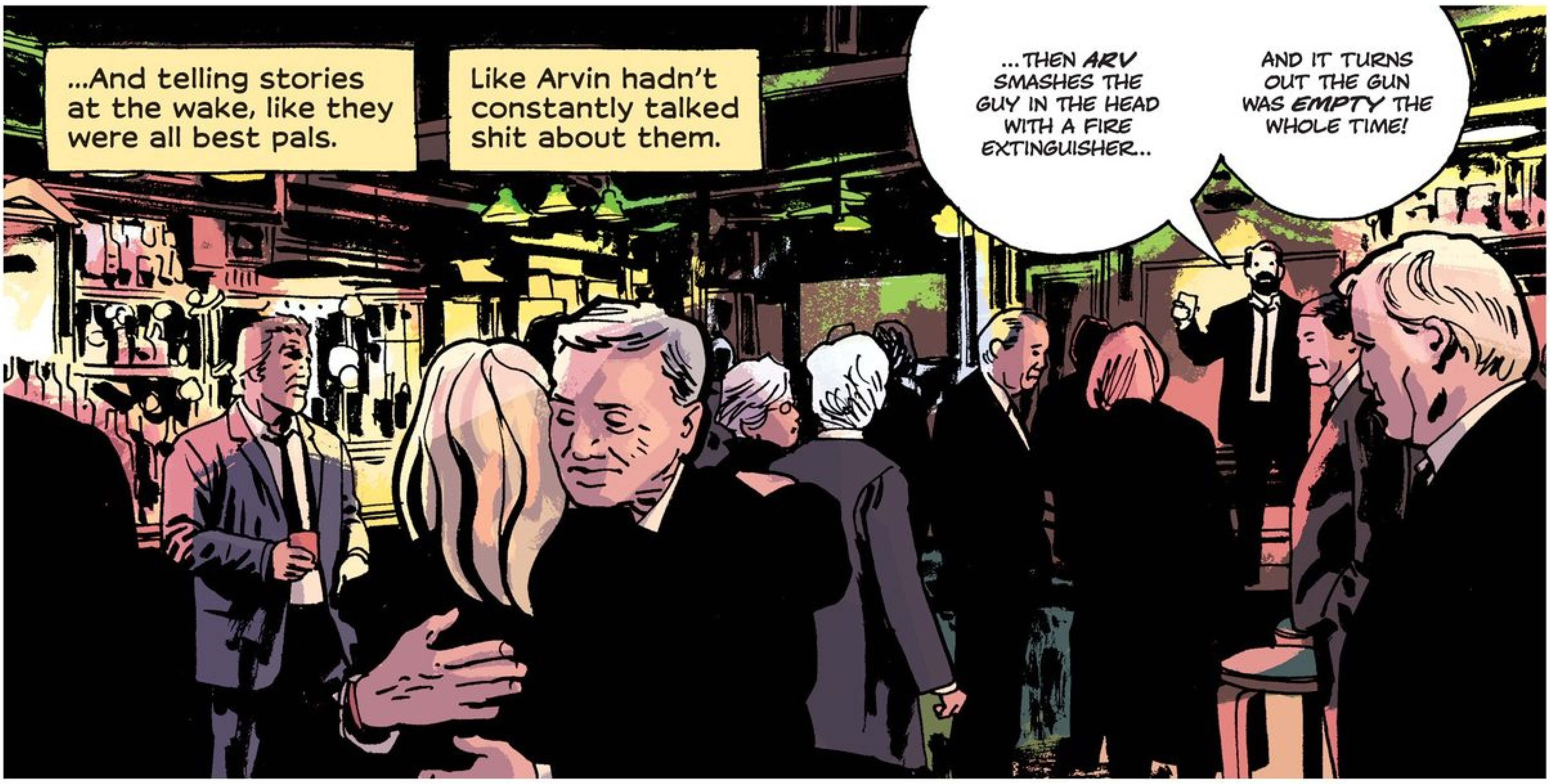

It wasn't their first time, and Teeg figured it probably wouldn't be their last.
But it was no good.
She was looking for something he couldn't give...
And he just wanted to get out of Arvin's old bed.
Now that he was dead, it somehow felt like more of a betrayal.
Teeg
Which didn't make any sense... but there it was.
ad to get an early start. See you at the funeral.
xx - Shar
PS - Don't steal anything.

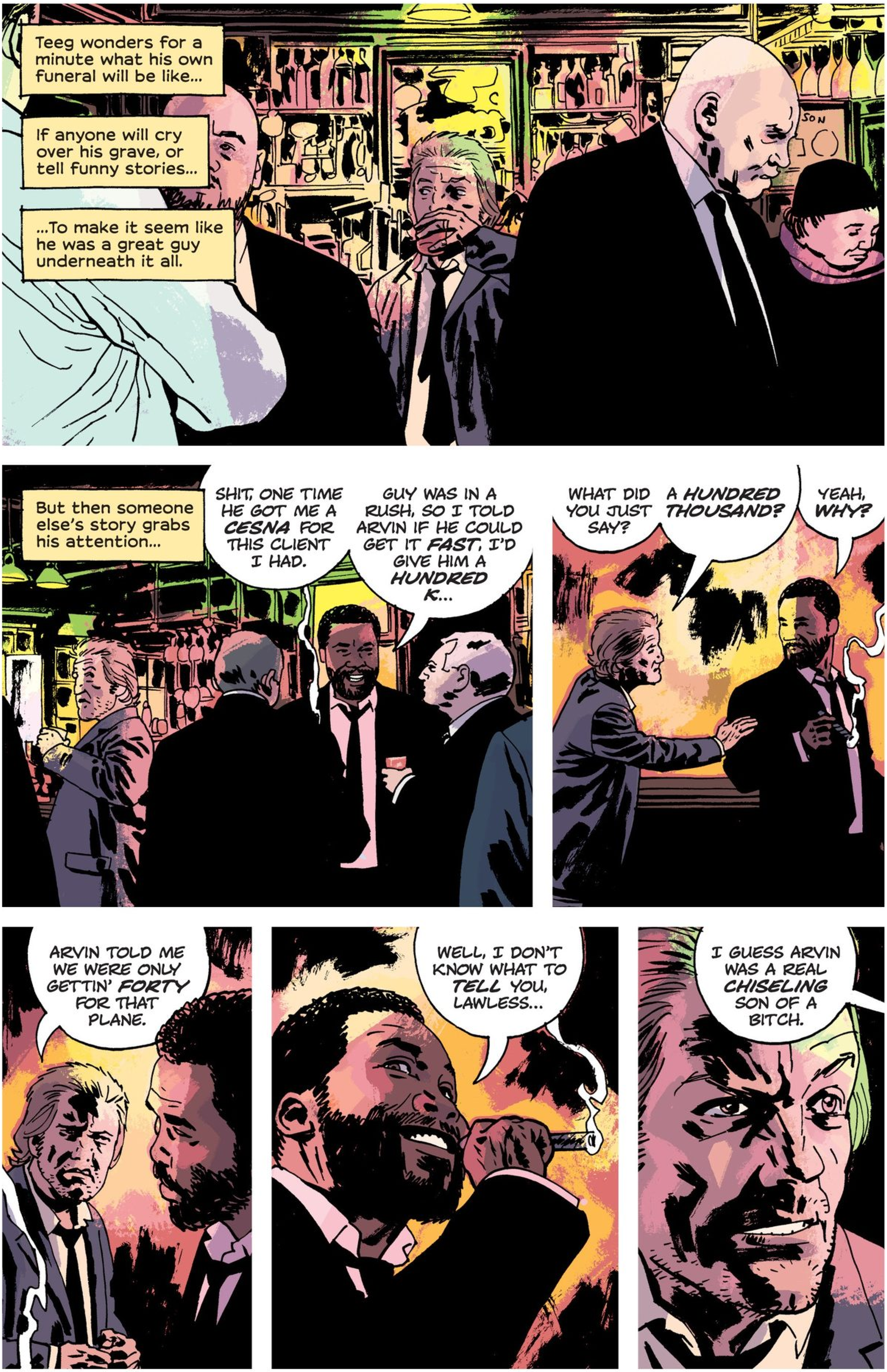

Teeg was surprised how many people showed up for the funeral.
Especially since he recognized some of the faces in the crowd...

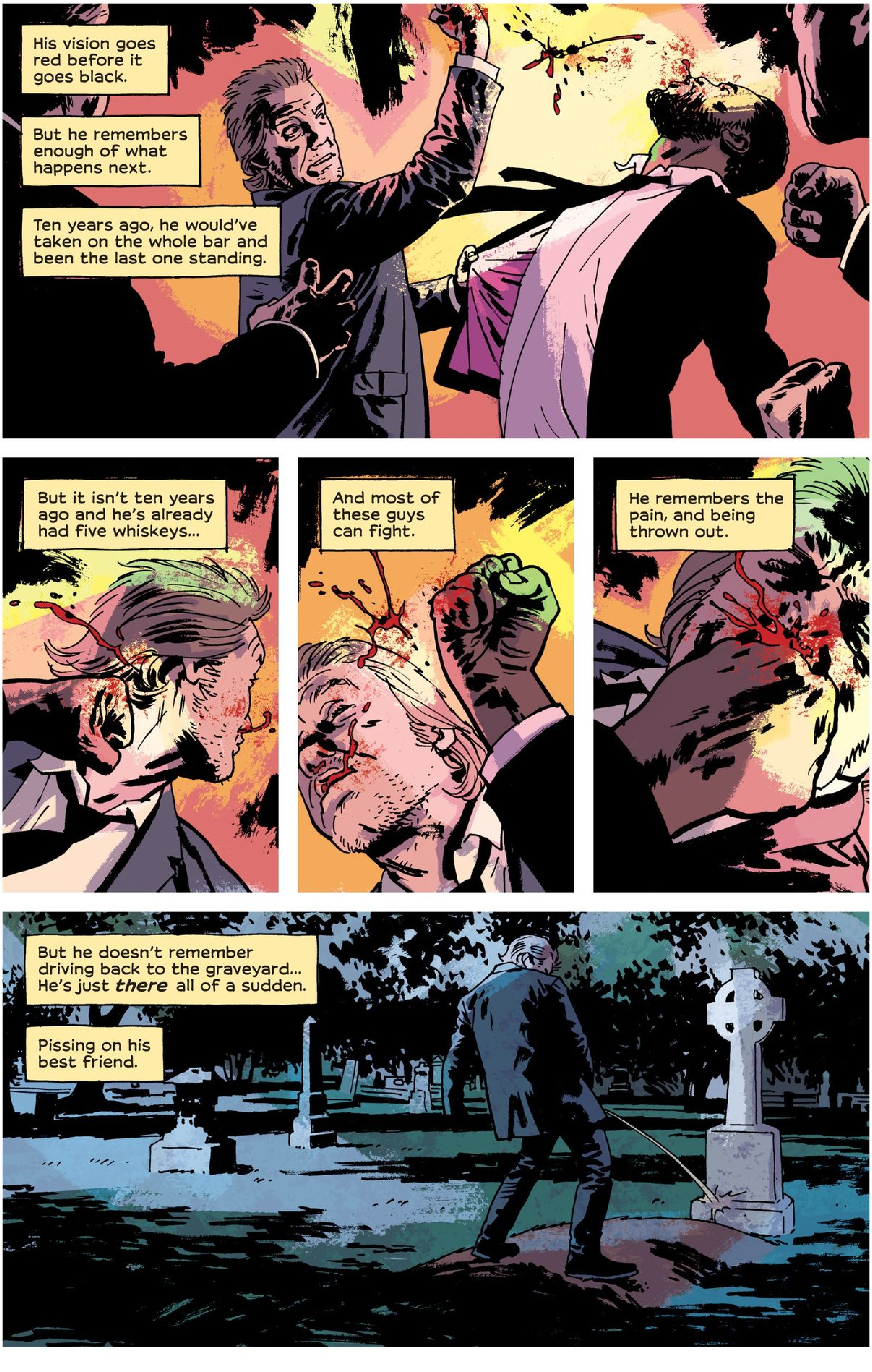

Tino Marquez and Chic Severin... Fever McNarry... *Vince* something...

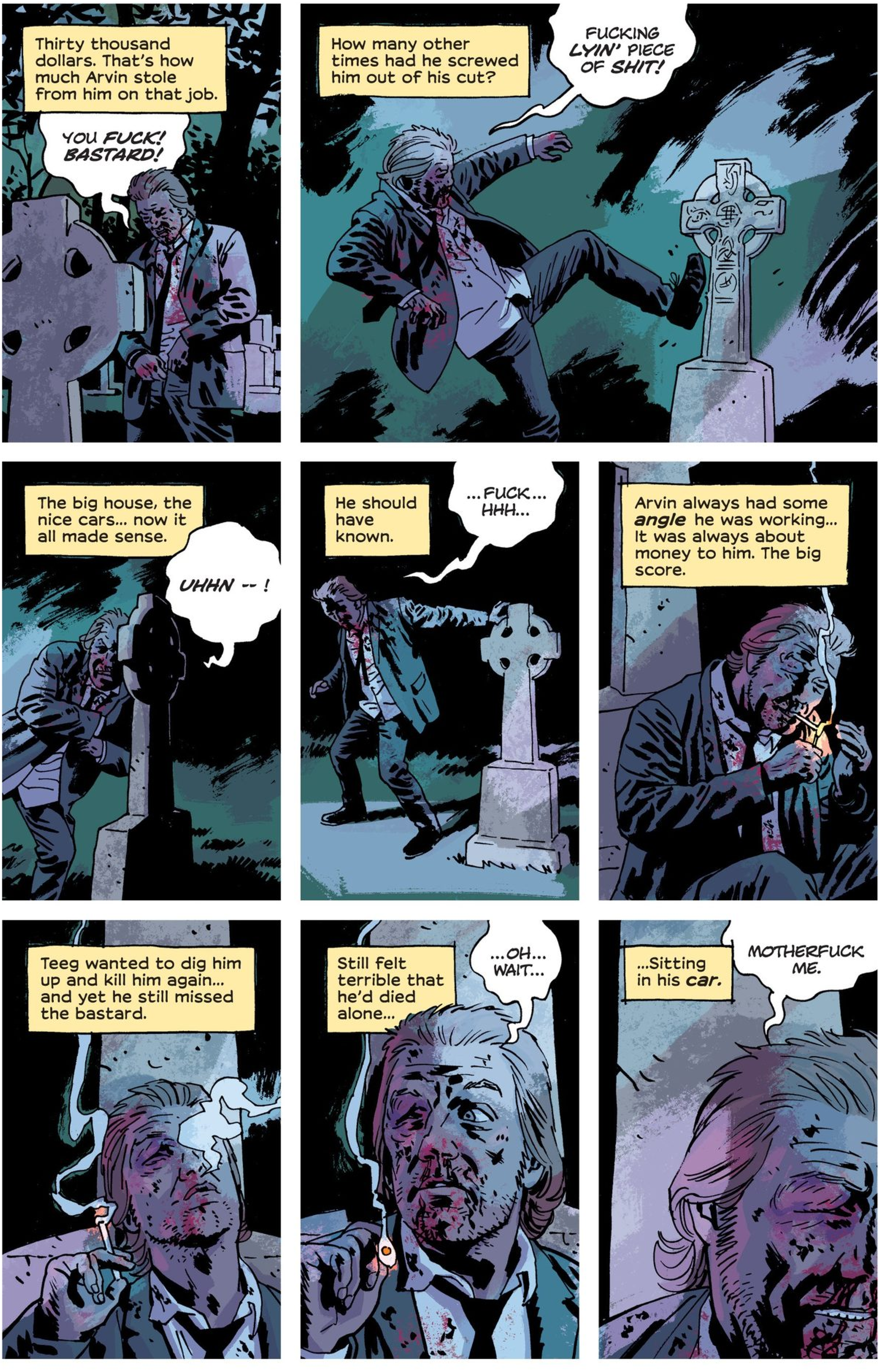

He was pretty sure Arvin *hated* all those guys.

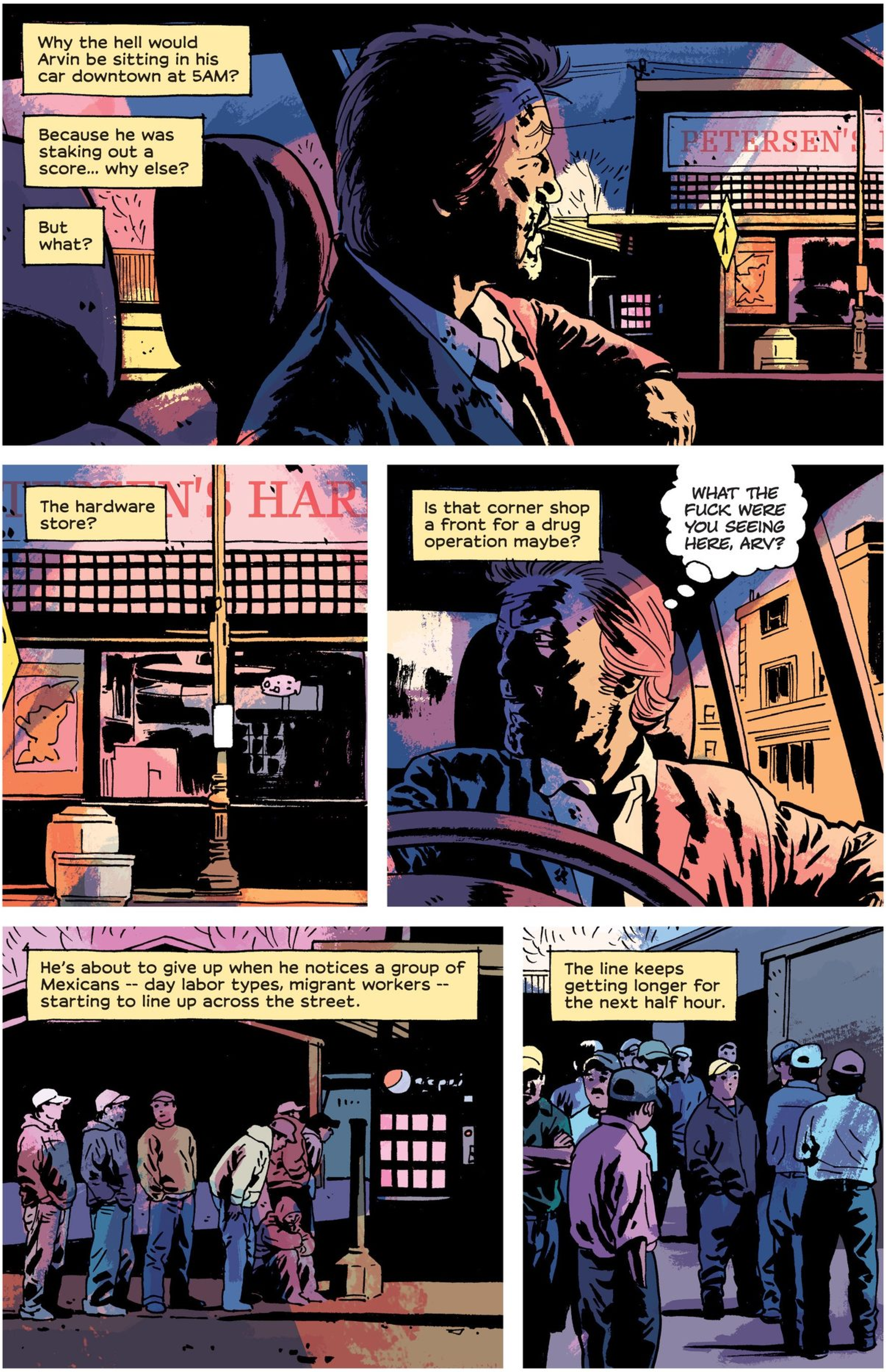

Yet here they were, looking somber as he's being put into the ground...

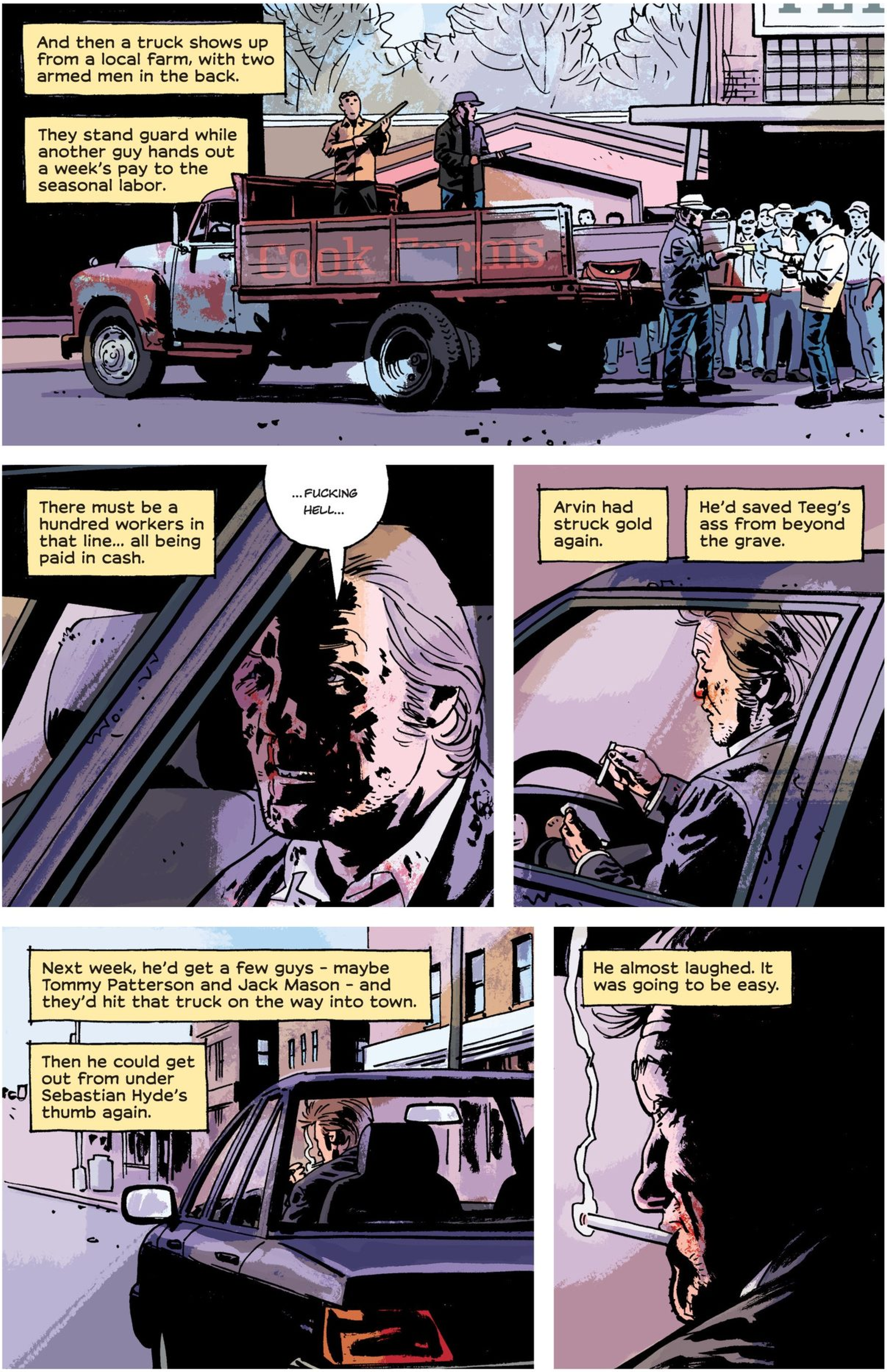

...And telling stories at the wake, like they were all best pals.
Like Arvin hadn't constantly talked shit about them.
...THEN *ARV* SMASHES THE GUY IN THE HEAD WITH A FIRE EXTINGUISHER...
AND IT TURNS OUT THE GUN WAS *EMPTY* THE WHOLE TIME!

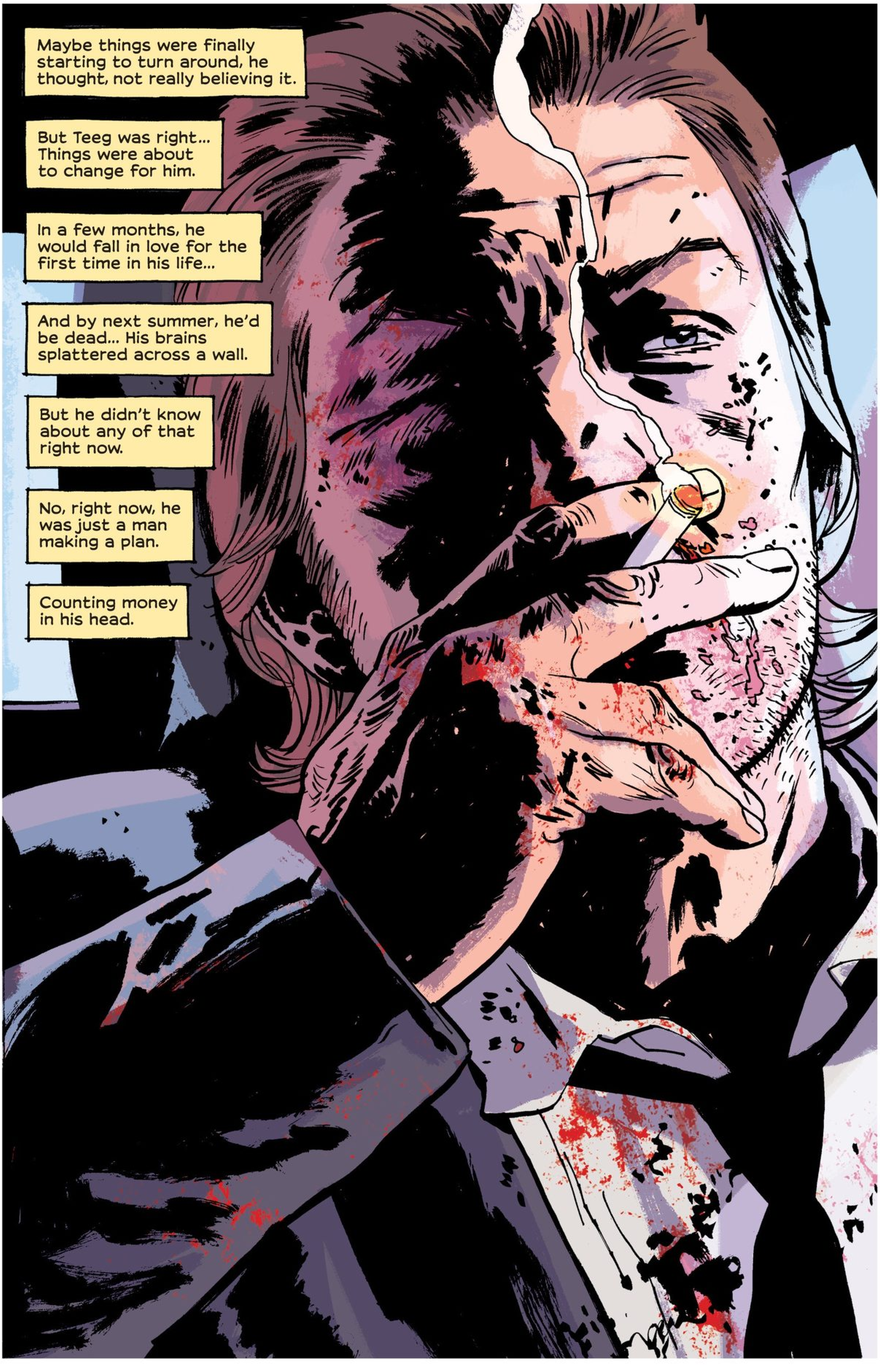

Teeg wonders for a minute what his own funeral will be like...
If anyone will cry over his grave, or tell funny stories...
...To make it seem like he was a great guy underneath it all.
But then someone else's story grabs his attention...
SHIT, ONE TIME HE GOT ME A CESNA FOR THIS CLIENT I HAD.
GUY WAS IN A RUSH, SO I TOLD ARVIN IF HE COULD GET IT FAST, I'D GIVE HIM A HUNDRED K...
WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?
A HUNDRED THOUSAND?
YEAH, WHY?
ARVIN TOLD ME WE WERE ONLY GETTIN' FORTY FOR THAT PLANE.
WELL, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TELL YOU, LAWLESS...
I GUESS ARVIN WAS A REAL CHISELING SON OF A BITCH.


His vision goes red before it goes black.
But he remembers enough of what happens next.
Ten years ago, he would've taken on the whole bar and been the last one standing.
But it isn't ten years ago and he's already had five whiskeys...
And most of these guys can fight.
He remembers the pain, and being thrown out.
But he doesn't remember driving back to the graveyard... He's just *there* all of a sudden.
Pissing on his best friend.


Thirty thousand dollars. That's how much Arvin stole from him on that job.
YOU *FUCK!* *BASTARD!*
How many other times had he screwed him out of his cut?
FUCKING *LYIN'* PIECE OF *SHIT!*
The big house, the nice cars... now it all made sense.
UHHN -- !
He should have known.
...FUCK... HHH...
Arvin always had some ***angle*** he was working... It was always about money to him. The big score.
Teeg wanted to dig him up and kill him again... and yet he still missed the bastard.
Still felt terrible that he'd died alone...
...OH... WAIT...
...Sitting in his ***car.***
MOTHERFUCK ME.


Why the hell would Arvin be sitting in his car downtown at 5AM?
Because he was staking out a score... why else?
But what?
PETERSEN'S
The hardware store?
ERSEN'S HAR
Is that corner shop a front for a drug operation maybe?
WHAT THE FUCK WERE YOU SEEING HERE, ARV?
He's about to give up when he notices a group of Mexicans -- day labor types, migrant workers -- starting to line up across the street.
The line keeps getting longer for the next half hour.


And then a truck shows up from a local farm, with two armed men in the back.
They stand guard while another guy hands out a week's pay to the seasonal labor.
Cook Farms
There must be a hundred workers in that line... all being paid in cash.
...FUCKING HELL...
Arvin had struck gold again.
He'd saved Teeg's ass from beyond the grave.
Next week, he'd get a few guys - maybe Tommy Patterson and Jack Mason - and they'd hit that truck on the way into town.
Then he could get out from under Sebastian Hyde's thumb again.
He almost laughed. It was going to be easy.


Maybe things were finally starting to turn around, he thought, not really believing it.
But Teeg was right... Things were about to change for him.
In a few months, he would fall in love for the first time in his life...
And by next summer, he'd be dead... His brains splattered across a wall.
But he didn't know about any of that right now.
No, right now, he was just a man making a plan.
Counting money in his head.

And we're back… Finally. Since we wrapped up KILL OR BE KILLED in August, we put out our first original hardback, MY HEROES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN JUNKIES and I went on a small book tour, before diving full steam into this new monthly version of CRIMINAL. But one thing I learned on my tour was that our readership has evolved over the past few years. In fact, I met a ton of people who only started reading me and Sean's books with KILL OR BE KILLED, and were just starting to delve into our back catalog now. So, since CRIMINAL is a book with a long past, I thought I'd do a quick history here in our first letters page. In future issues, I'll run letters and answer questions as usual.

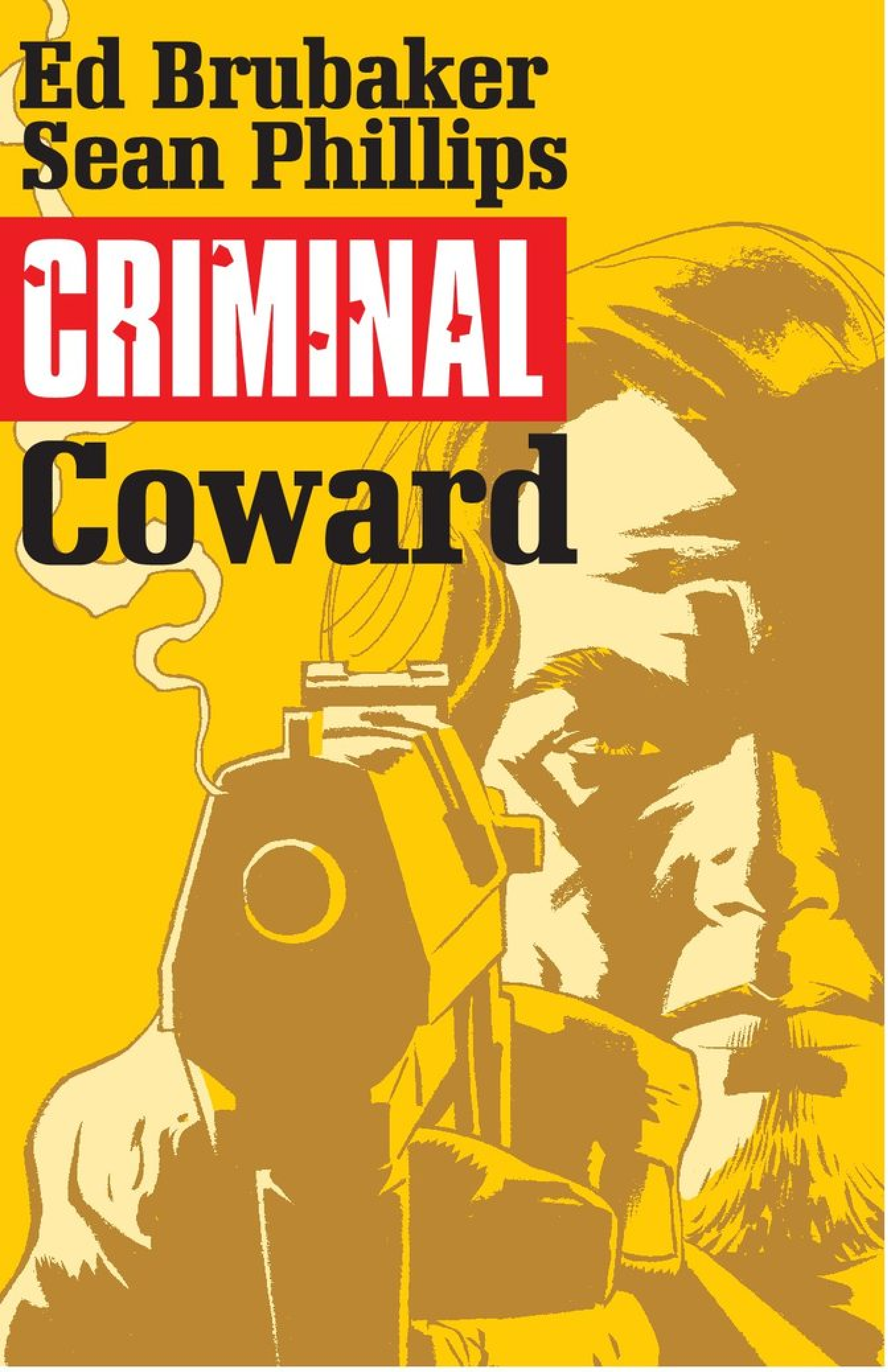
The Secret Ingredient is Crime

Sean Phillips and I started working together at DC Comics in 1999, with a one-shot called GOTHAM NOIR (Sean had inked Scene of the Crime right before this). While he was doing that, I sold a book called SLEEPER to Wildstorm, and Sean joined me on that for the next few years. Sleeper was a cult hit, but it helped us establish ourselves as a team and build a readership, and it remains in print to this day, going through a lot of rereleases and reformatting, including a giant hardback doorstop version.

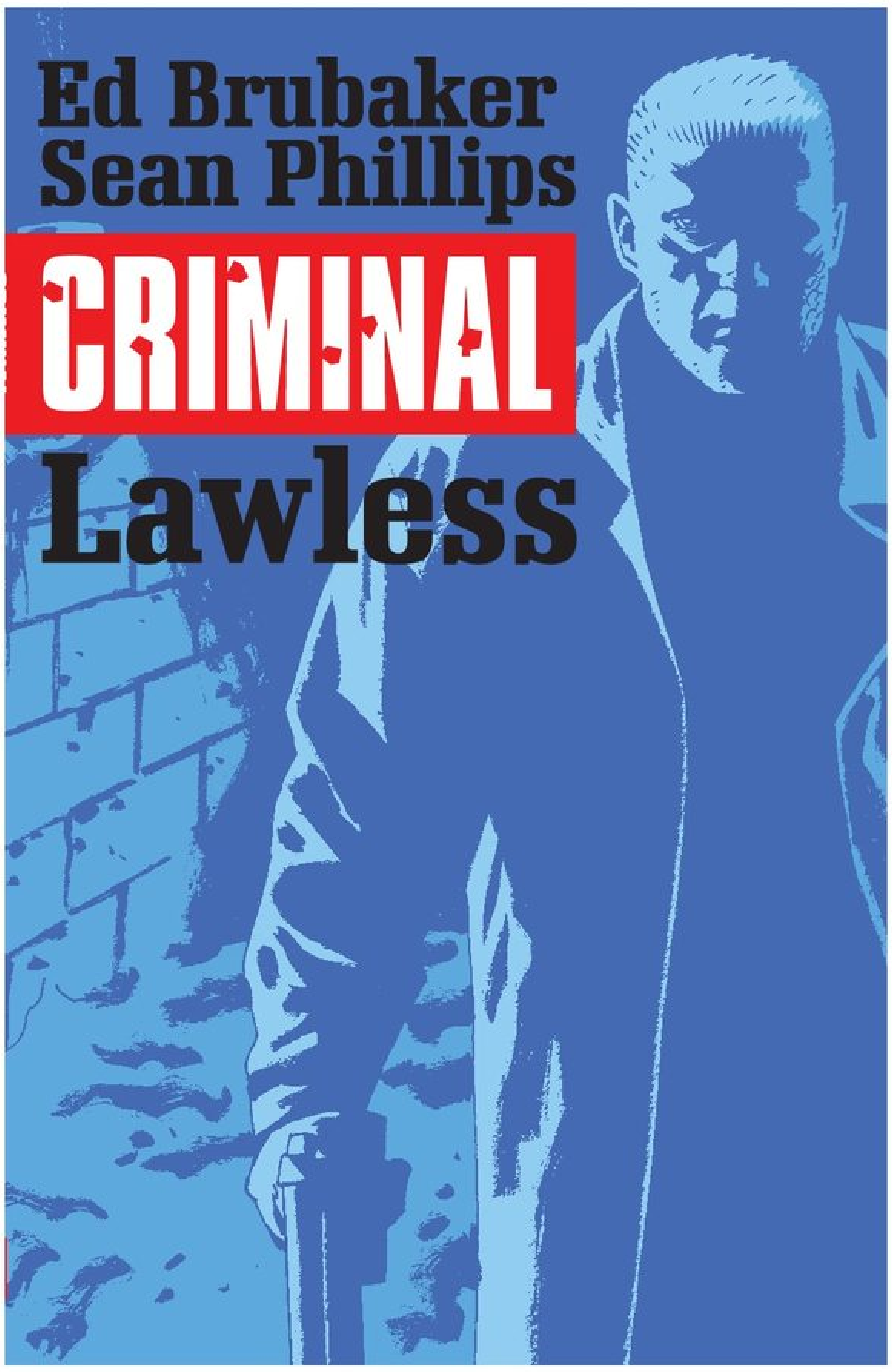
When Sleeper wrapped, we almost did two different projects (one for Wildstorm and one for IDW) before we ended up putting out CRIMINAL instead. I was trying to land on an idea I liked enough to devote several years to, and I knew I wanted to finance it myself so we could own it completely, unlike SLEEPER, which is owned by DC. But since it was a gamble, I was stressing about what to write. Then one day, my wife asked me what I would do if the money wasn't an issue. If I could do anything I wanted, without worrying about whether it was a success or not, what would I do? And I had the answer already. I would do a straight crime comic that had an umbrella title, and a rotating cast of characters. I'd create a book where I could tell any kind of story I wanted to. So I pitched the idea to Sean and we were on our way.

When we first launched, there were only a couple other crime comics on the stands (I mean, hell, there are still only a couple crime comics 13 years later) so as I mentioned, this idea felt risky. But we did a lot of outreach to retailers and readers, and a lot of Sleeper fans stepped up to help spread the word and even bring printed out previews to their local shops to push it on them. And while the early years were a struggle, we ended up with a hit book. We won some awards, sold foreign rights all over the world, and got a lot of movie interest (I even had drinks with The Rock about CRIMINAL once, believe it or not).

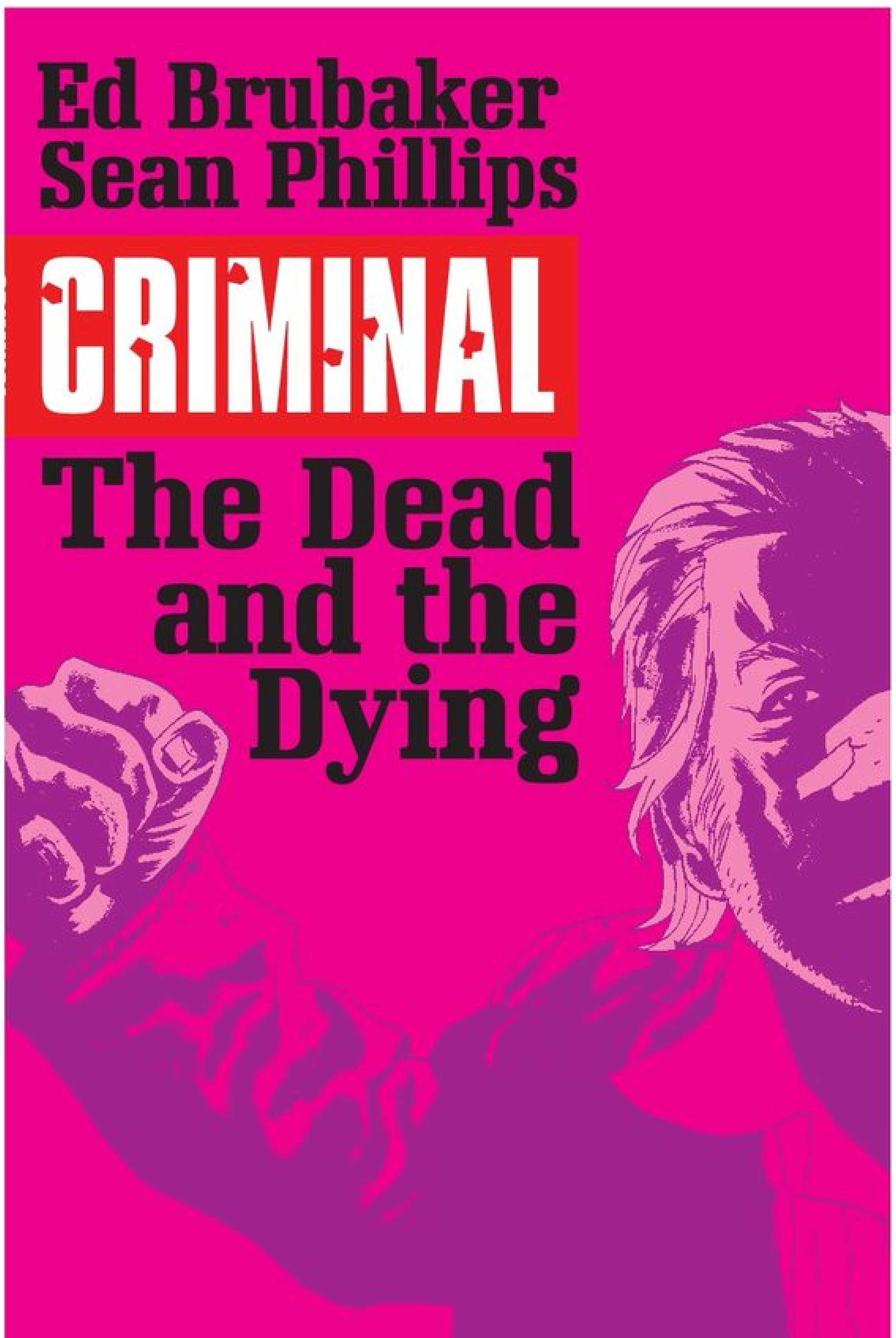
After a few years, we got the itch to try some other projects, but CRIMINAL was always the thing we came back to, and it evolved over time into something that I think shows the elasticity of crime and noir stories, and became both more personal and more experimental. So, if this is your first time checking out CRIMINAL, let me tell you a bit about what has come before… But first, I need to let you know that every CRIMINAL story, from this issue all the way back to the first book, can be read and enjoyed without having read the other books. I think they add to each other and create a kind of tapestry of crime and damaged family history, but I've always worked hard to ensure they stand on their own, and are, in the parlance of comics "new-reader-friendly."


Ed Brubaker
Sean Phillips
CRIMINAL
Coward

CRIMINAL book 1: COWARD – This was our first book, and it's a flip on the usual tough-guy criminal type of story. Leo (who we met in this issue at age 16) is a brilliant pickpocket and bank robber, who tries as hard as he can to avoid violence and guns. This book set the stage for everything that would follow, as Leo gets involved in a heist and has to break his own rules.

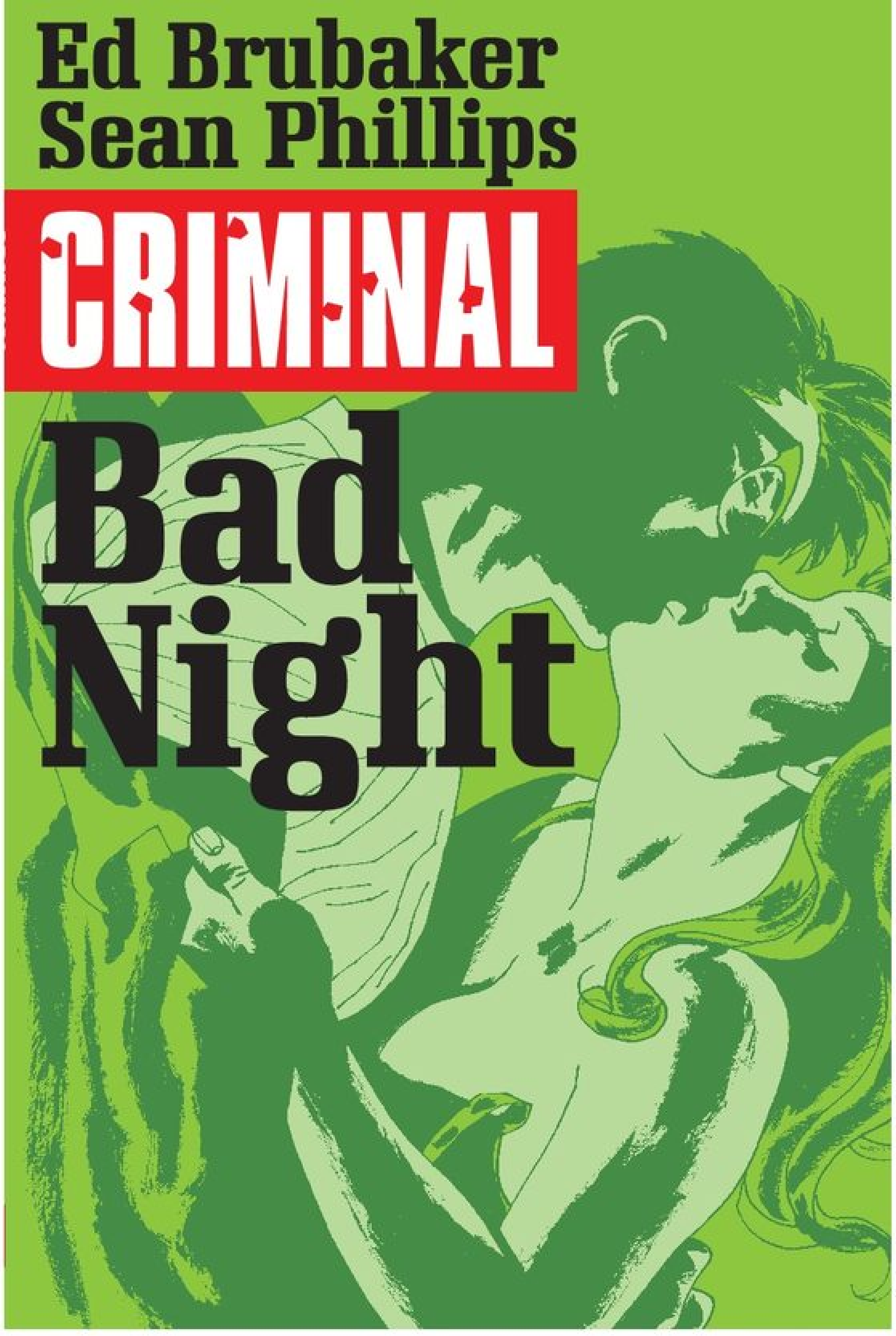

Ed Brubaker
Sean Phillips
CRIMINAL
Lawless

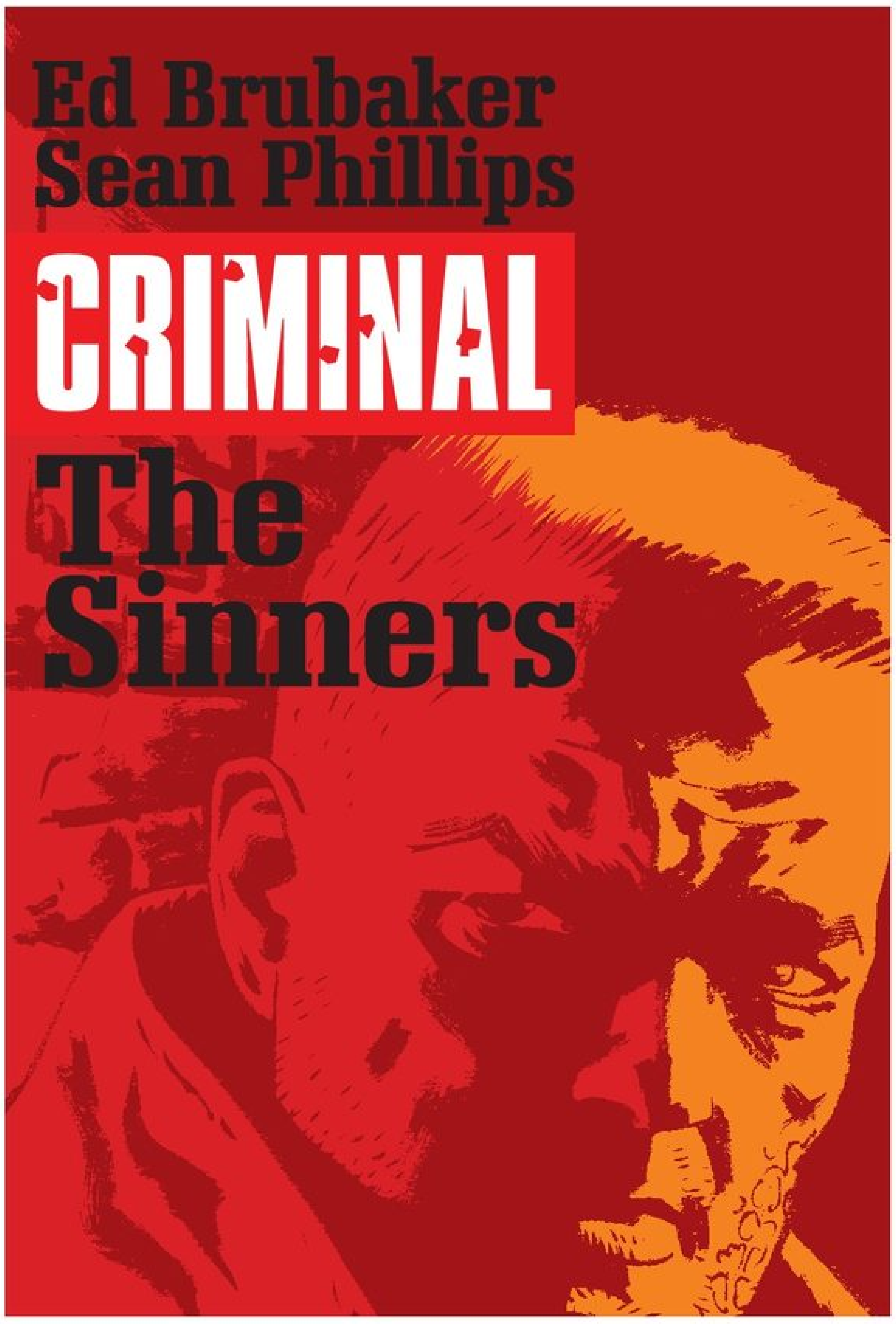
CRIMINAL book 2: LAWLESS – This is where we met Tracy Lawless, the older son of Teeg, who returns to the city after nearly 20 years away in the military. This book expanded on everything that Coward did, and allowed me a way to start weaving that tapestry I mentioned, showing flashbacks to Tracy and Ricky's childhood in the 70s and 80s, and making it a story about fathers and sons and brothers as much as it was about murder and revenge.


Ed Brubaker
Sean Phillips
CRIMINAL
The Dead and the Dying

CRIMINAL book 3: THE DEAD AND THE DYING – This book is a collection of three interlinked stories, all spinning around the same crime, all told from different points of view. Gnarly Brown is a young boxer in the early 1970s, who crosses paths with Teeg Lawless, just home from Vietnam, and both of them are pulled into a very dark scheme involving a woman from Gnarly's past. This is where we started to realize how flexible CRIMINAL could be, as the stories are told out of order and jump around in time a lot.

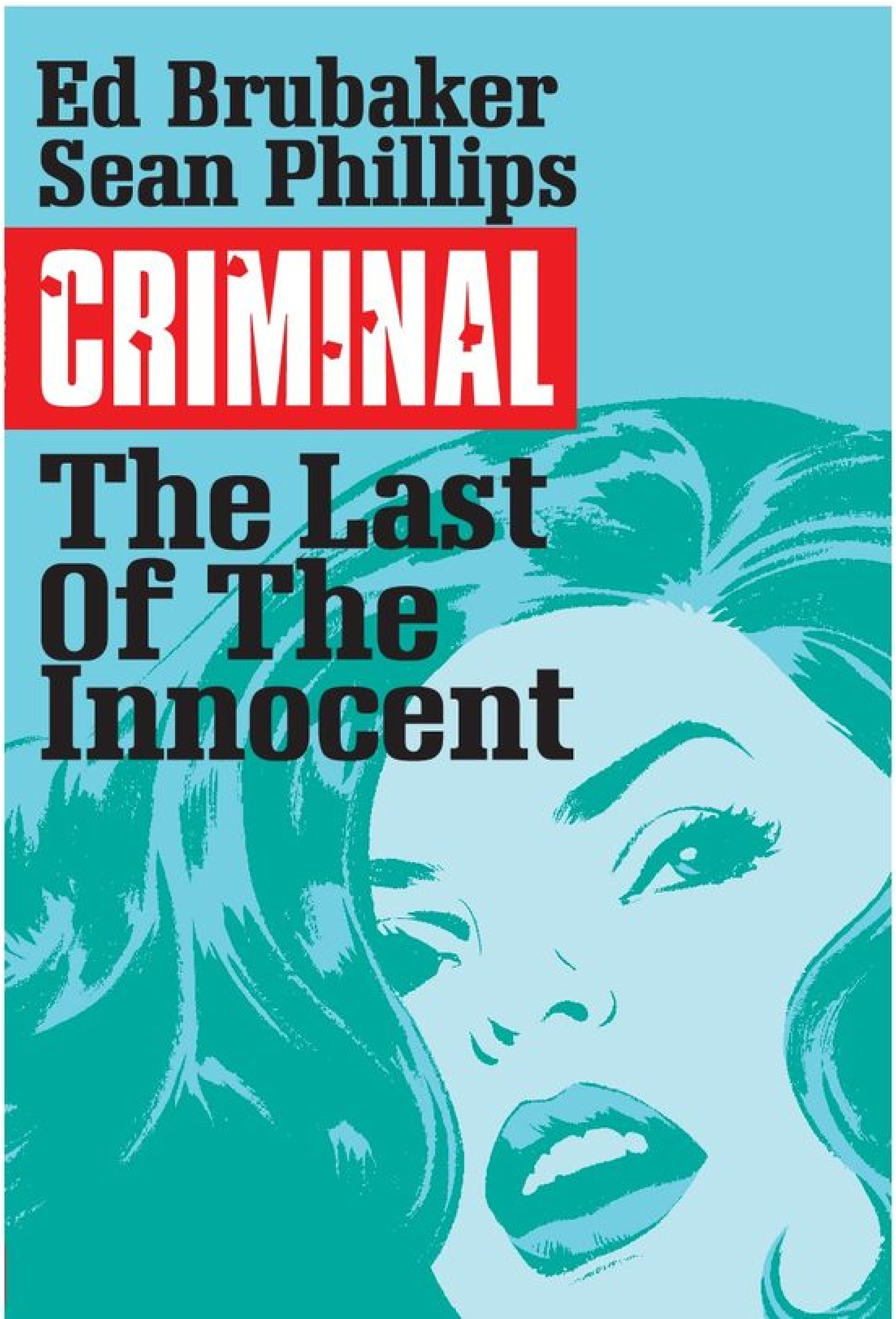
CRIMINAL book 4: BAD NIGHT – Starring Jacob Kurtz, an ex-forger turned newspaper cartoonist, this story started as a nightmare I had, and ended up as one of my favorite things I've ever written. Jacob is a damaged noir protagonist trying to hide from his past, but his loneliness gets the better of him, and he finds himself quickly over his head in a plot to steal some mob money in Chinatown. There's way more going on in this story than that description. Jacob appears in book 2, as a minor character.

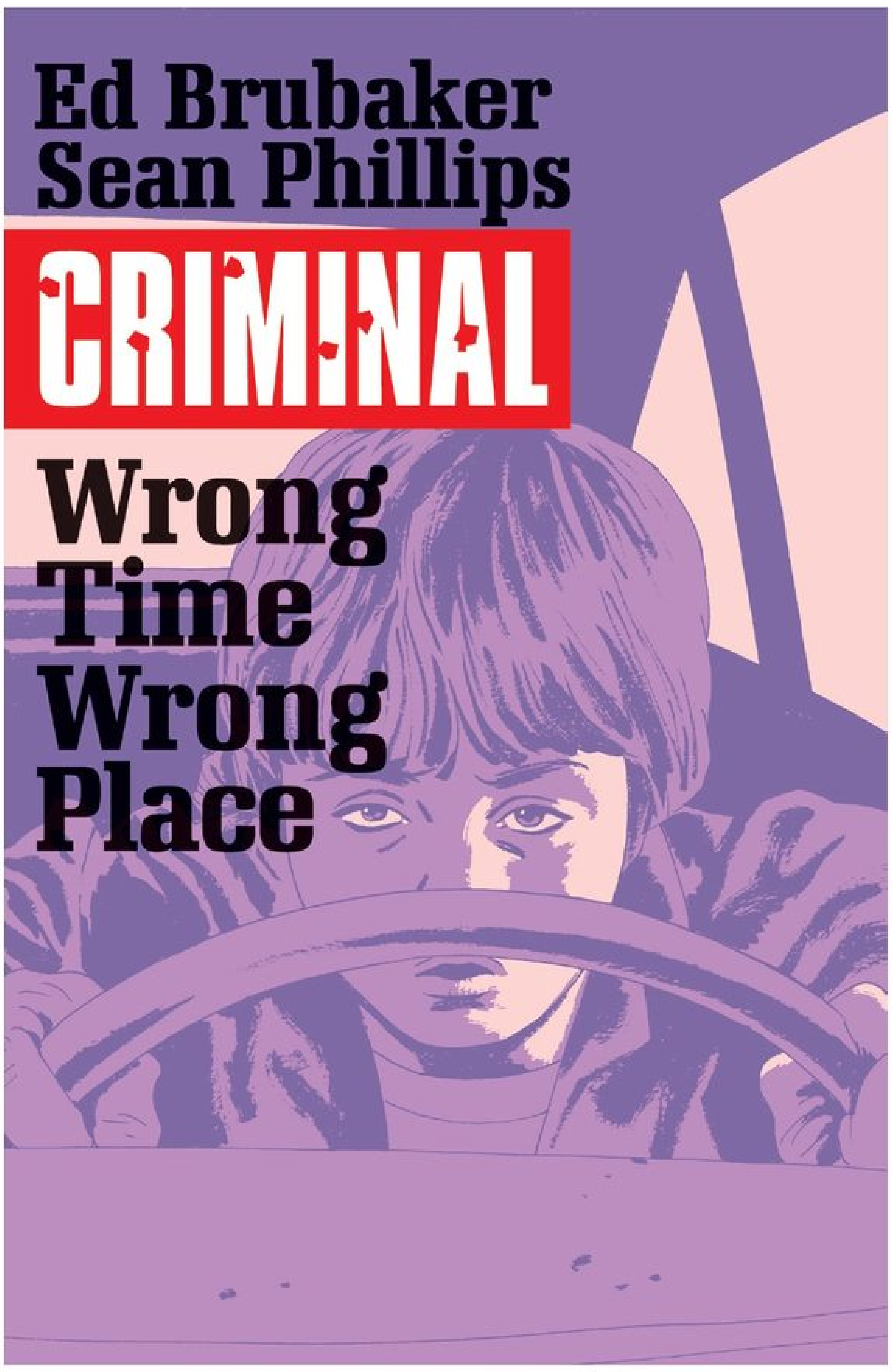




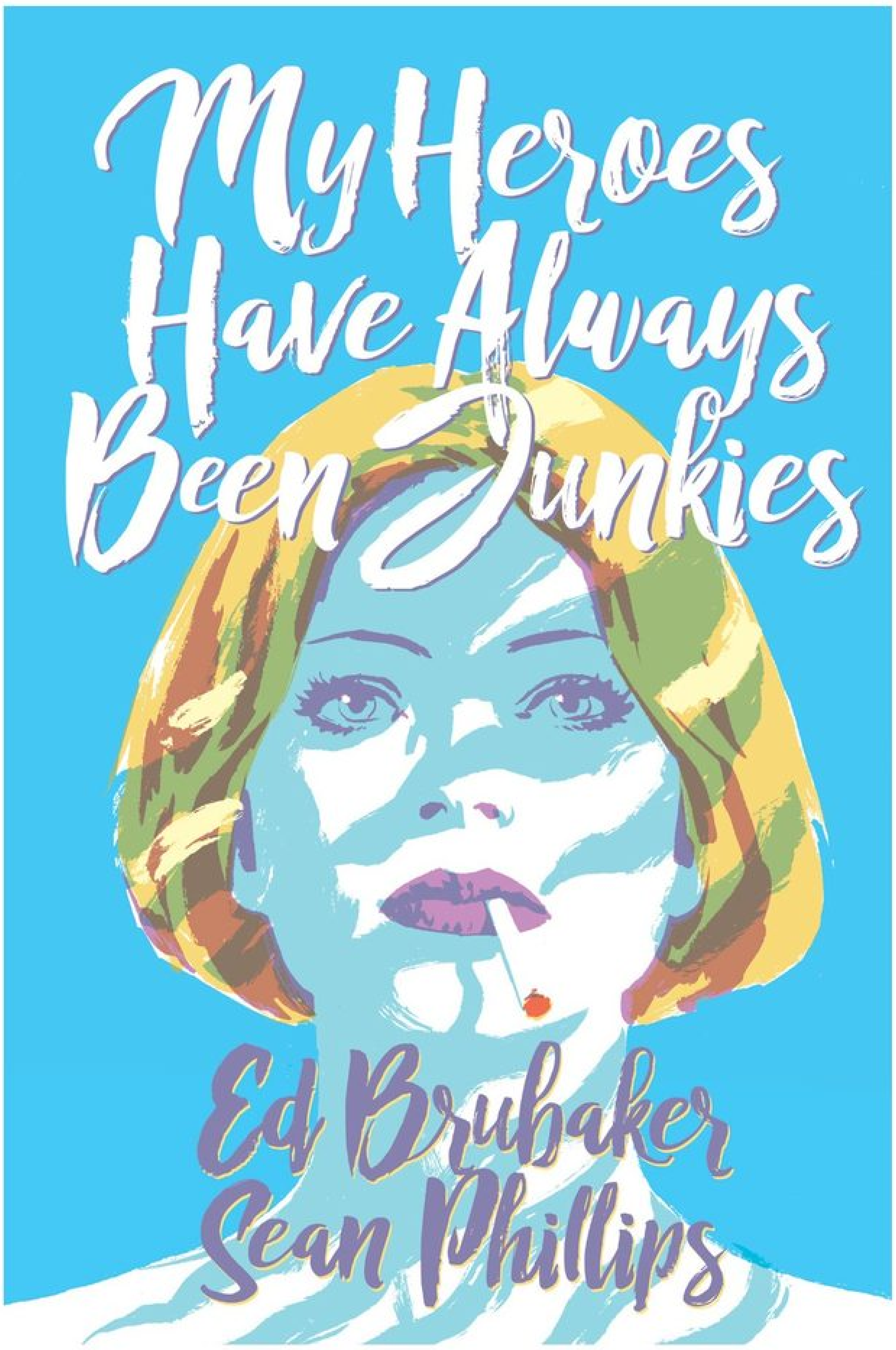
CRIMINAL book 5: THE SINNERS – Picking up a year or so after LAWLESS, we see what's become of Tracy Lawless, when he's forced to solve a series of murders the cops aren't interested in. Because the victims are all big time criminals. A sort of murder mystery or PI story, this was our first time returning to a main character from a previous story, and when I started to realize the Lawless family was the spine that most of our world was built around. This was a revelation to me, because you don't always know what you're writing about when you're writing it.

CRIMINAL book 6: THE LAST OF THE INNOCENT – Probably everyone's favorite CRIMINAL story, this book was written after my father's death from cancer, during a time of grief and nostalgia that I, for some reason, channeled into a kind of meta-story about kids comics and growing up. It's all about me and my family emotionally, but if you see analogs of Archie and Jughead and Richie Rich and Encyclopedia Brown in this book, you aren't wrong. Set in the early 1980s, Teeg Lawless has several appearances, but most of the book takes place in a small town north of the city, where Riley Richards (everyone's favorite teen, now grown up) will do anything to get back to the world he used to live in. Even murder. Like I said, CRIMINAL isn't the usual crime comic, and this book was an experiment that somehow worked, and even won us an Eisner Award.





CRIMINAL book 7 – WRONG TIME, WRONG PLACE – Collecting two long stories about Teeg Lawless, one where he's in jail in the mid-70s, and one set a few years later, where he and Tracy are on the road for a mysterious reason. Young Tracy on the road, watching his drunk father rant about Vietnam is one of the most personal things I've ever written. I wasn't sure what to do next with CRIMINAL after book 6, and then one day I started hearing 12-year-old Tracy Lawless's voice in my head, telling me about being a child getaway driver.



And finally, although it isn't officially CRIMINAL book 8, MY HEROES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN JUNKIES also takes place in the same world as all these other books, and stars a young woman who we first met as a child in one of the early books (I don't want to spoil it for you). This book was a huge hit, unexpectedly, and when working on it, I just realized I was not going to be happy unless we returned to CRIMINAL as a monthly comic again. I had too many ideas for stories, and I just missed this world. So I set aside the thing we were going to do (a sort of sequel to The Fade Out) and started writing the issue you hopefully just read.

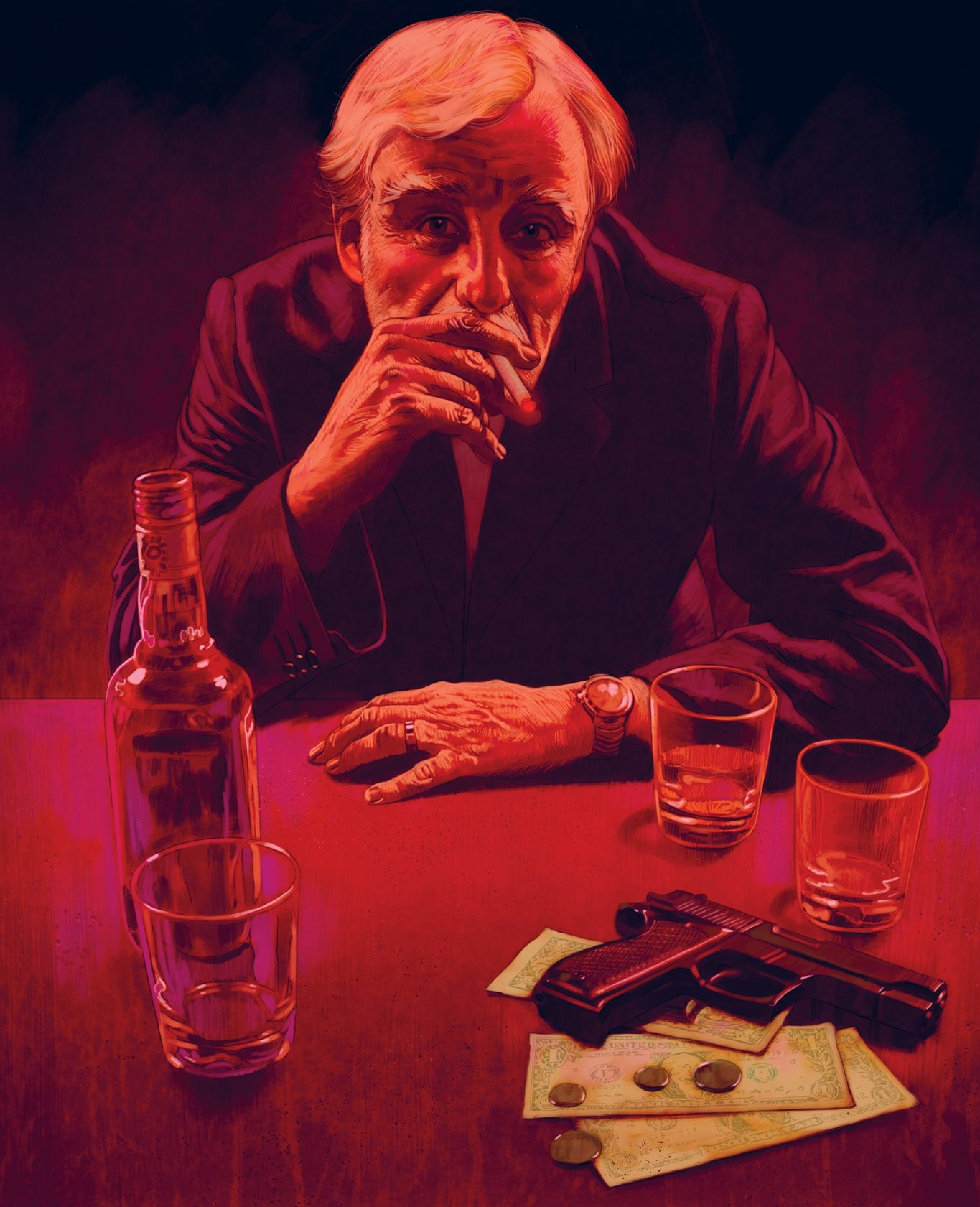
And that brings us up to where we are now… With this new monthly version of CRIMINAL, which for the first time, is not going to just be serialized graphic novels like we used to do. We will do some longer serialized stories, for sure, but I really wanted to embrace what monthly comics used to do more often, and just try to be something surprising every issue. I don't want you to know exactly what's coming next. I want to put out a book that can do a single issue story, or a two-parter, and go from an issue like this one here, to a story set nearly ten years later in the next one. Partly to follow my writing muse, and so Sean and I can try different kinds of stories, but also because I want to take you on a ride every month, and I don't want you to know where you're going. Just that it's probably to the wrong side of town.

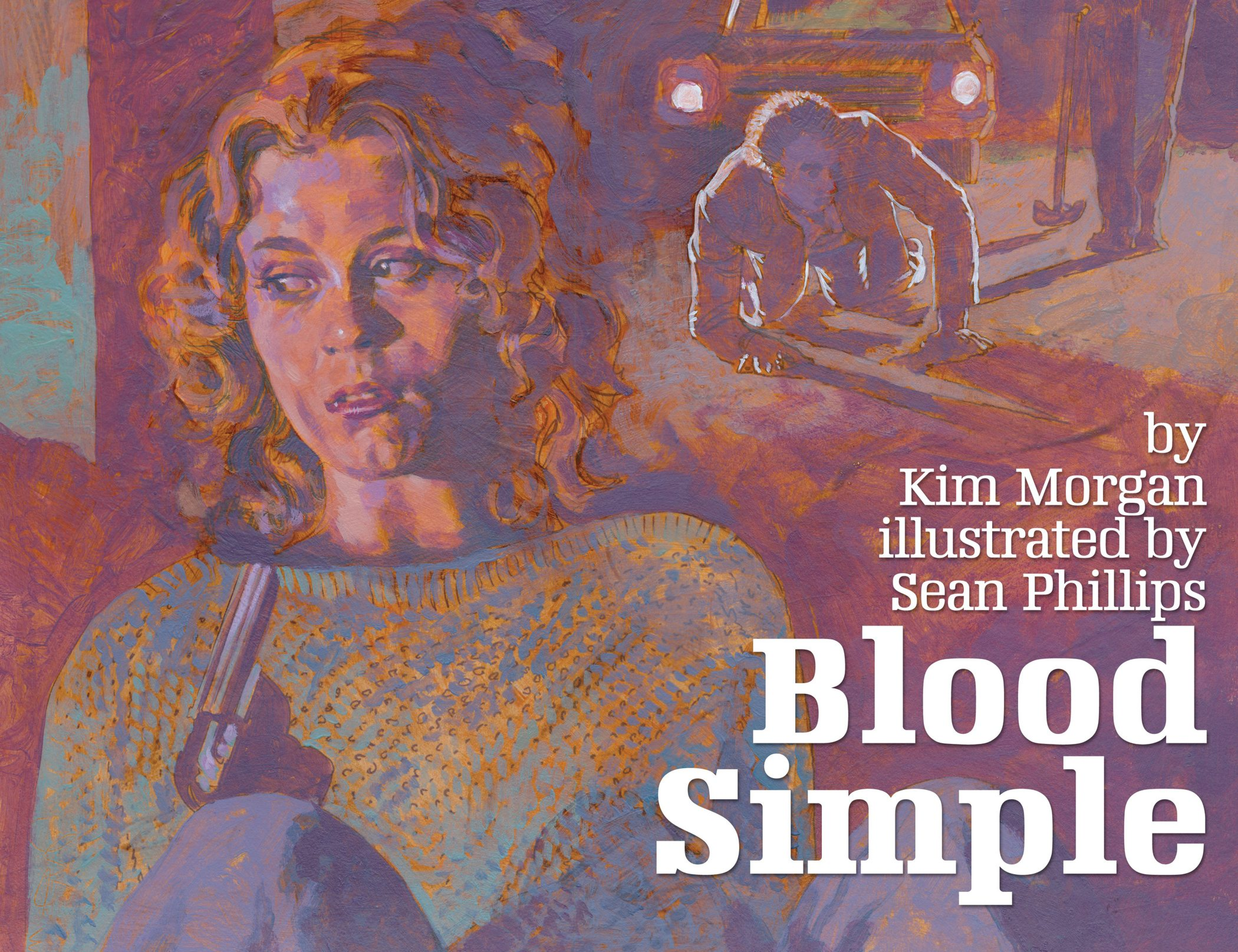
Joining us on colors again, following his debut as a colorist with JUNKIES, is Sean's son Jacob Phillips, who you may have seen doing illustrations in our back pages the last few years. Jake is doing an amazing job, and I love that we're keeping the book in the family, so to speak. We decided to change things up a bit in the back page content, too. Kim Morgan returns this issue with a great piece about the first Coen Brothers movie, and she'll be in a lot of our future issues, too, but she'll also be doing articles and profiles and maybe even some interviews from time to time now.

So, I hope you're on board for the ride, because we're having a lot of fun so far.

Okay, that's it, we'll be back next month with issue 2, which is called BAD WEEKEND and you can see the cover below.

Write to us at: criminalcomic@gmail.com with questions and comments for future letters pages.





by
Kim Morgan
illustrated by
Sean Phillips

Blood Simple

Blood Simple is a lonely movie. The movie sweats, cries, and bleeds loneliness. The road the two lovers, Ray (John Getz) and Abby (Frances McDormand) drive down at night, opening the film, is lonely. Never mind that they are together and about to consummate their union in a hotel room – it's a lonely road – as remote as Hank Williams' "Lost Highway," as friendless as Tom Neal hitching a ride in Edgar G. Ulmer's down and dirty *Detour*. And the hotel doesn't feel so uniting either – lonely cars rushing past, casting shadows on the wood paneled walls and dingy white sheets. Is it romantic? Not really. The bar that the cuckolded, perpetually fuming Marty, Abby's husband (Dan Hedaya) owns and runs is lonely – he seems to live in the back, and only at night, feet up on the tables in the neon-bathed blackness, sweating and stressing, talking to a sleazo PI with contempt. When he attempts, miserably, to woo a pretty patron at the bar, she amusingly tells him to get lost ("Now that I've communicated, why don't you leave?"). No one wants this man. And he knows it. It's a lonely old world – and we begin to feel sorry for him, even though we really shouldn't (he's going to ask the PI to off his cheating wife and her lover, a bartender he employs).

And then there's the constant Four Tops song that bursts out of the bar juke-box in bracing moments – "It's the Same Old Song"— something that could work to ironic effect (and perhaps does to some viewers) but a tune that serenades the movie with its abandoned refrain: *"Now, it's the same old song, but with a different meaning since you been gone…"* That could be Marty's song, or any of the characters, really, as their fates feel like the repetitions of the tune via the repetition of their mistakes, mistakes that make them even lonelier. The same but different. It's no surprise that M. Emmet Walsh's Private Detective Loren Visser opens the film with this voice-over, saying of the film's setting, the lone star state of Texas: "Down here, you're on your own."

Not that the movie takes the character's loneliness and murderous predicaments with solemn seriousness – it certainly doesn't – but it doesn't mock them or the noir genre either. Lifting our spirits (honestly, the movie's sheer ingenuity and voice is spirit lifting, if that is the right way to put it), there is something morbidly funny about how awful this all becomes, in part, because there is something morbidly funny about how *many* noir twists turn out. Here it's Marty's murderous plans double-crossed by Visser, and then characters not knowing what is truly going on or who did what or who is who – it even *ends* with Visser's laugh when Abby mistakes him for Ray, Visser deliciously uttering mock-politely as he lies bleeding in the bathroom: "If I see him, I'll sure give him the message." (That's all I will say about the plot if you haven't seen the movie, just watch). It's this offbeat, mordant, but very human humor mixed with startling bursts of violence and striking, singular style (Barry Sonnenfeld as cinematographer – his first narrative feature film) that makes this 1984 neo-noir directed, written and produced by Joel and Ethan Coen (their first movie) still feel so refreshingly alive. Yes, alive, even as almost everyone in this movie is likely gonna die soon (I won't say who). As some 1980s and 1990s neo-noirs show their age, or feel too soaked in their own style for the sake of style, *Blood Simple* remains timeless.

The title is taken from Dashiell Hammett's "Red Harvest": "This damned burg's getting me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood-simple like the natives." But as frequently stated, the picture is very much inspired by James M. Cain (whom the Coen's revere – as they're quoted via Ronald Bergan's informative "The Coen Brothers": "We've always thought that up at Low Library at Columbia University, where the names are chiseled up there above the columns of stone—Aristotle, Herodotus, Virgil—that the fourth one should be Cain." Bergan says they're being hyperbolic and he's probably right but I am not so sure…)

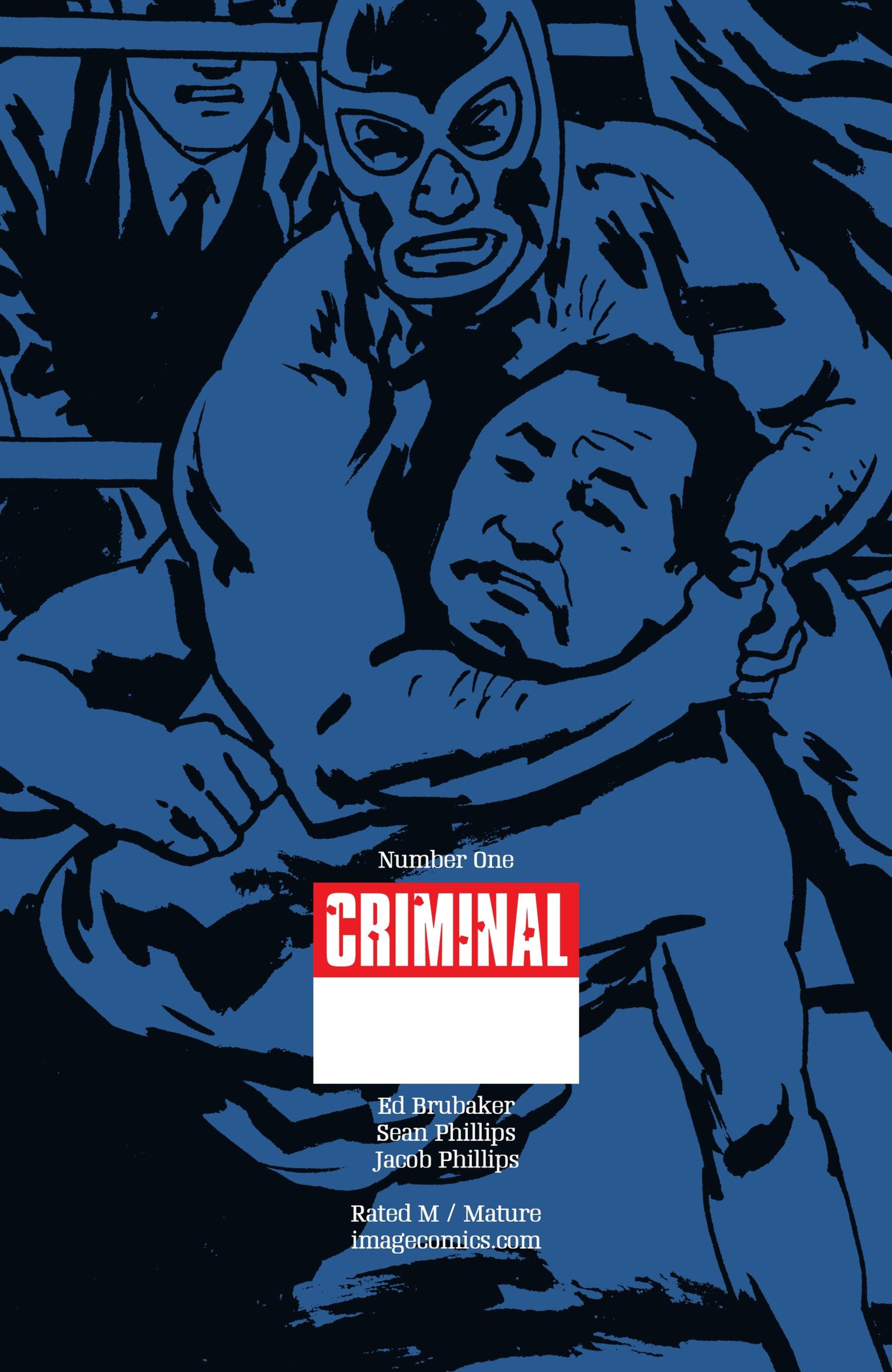
As Bergan states, however, the picture isn't as sexy as Cain, and he's right. And this is to the film's benefit – it's not trying too hard to be hot, it's not doling out a bunch of clichés aping pulp and noirs that *were* very sexy (as Cain could be), that make a few neo-noirs of the 80s and 90s now feels silly and forced. Decisions were made here that were smart – the "femme fatale" doesn't come sashaying into an office gussied up or speaking in sexy low tones, rather, she looks like a normal but very pretty woman. There are no "let's be noir" saxophone or saxophone-like moments and instead the music, by Carter Burwell (his first, marking a long future collaboration with the Coens), is melancholic and haunting. Even the constant sound of the ceiling fan and the neon-bathed bar go beyond just the style and remarks more on the film's sad beauty, its tension and mood – it is suffocating over sensual. And the final shootout is visual bravura, scary and wonderfully bizarre. And even funny. The filmmakers respect the genre (and continued working within it or in movies that contained element of it – among them – *Miller's Crossing, Barton Fink, Fargo, The Man Who Wasn't There* and *No Country For Old Men* which brought them back to Texas) but also see how inherently funny and absurd it can be. And without slipping into parody, which, in one early interview, Joel Coen makes a point to clarify: "We never looked at it as a parody though, from our point of view we were always attempting to do sort of a fairly straightforward thriller, we just wanted it to be as humorous as possible."

There is indeed something incredibly humorous about how much these lonely characters will endure and then, something truly exciting about how much they *try* (and fuck up). Walsh (who is brilliant here – all suited up with that cowboy hat, shit-eating grin, and driving that VW bug) says something that is both resilient and gross, and also hilarious: "Give me a call whenever you wanna cut off my head. I can always crawl around without it." In a weirdly, affectively disgusting way, Walsh's Visser becomes the sexist, least lonely character in the movie. He's certainly a sensualist. Even if he may die, with those fantastic lines he utters, and that laugh, he will leave something – a memorable trail of slime.

That's not nothing.

by
Kim Morgan
illustrated by
Sean Phillips

Blood Simple



Number One

CRIMINAL

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